

Other Viewpoints

Kansas not passing in graduation rates

At first blush, new data released by the Kansas Board of Education, which showed that one in every five high school students doesn't earn a high school diploma within four years, is quite alarming.

However, it should be noted that a new method for calculating this statistic was used.

That accounts for the reason the number dropped nearly 9 percent, to a graduation rate of 80.7 percent in Kansas last year, but is it any reason for anyone to breathe a sigh of relief?

Probably not.

Earning a high school diploma isn't rocket science – unless one chooses it to be. At its most basic form, a high school diploma is earned simply with regular attendance, doing the modicum of classroom work and finding a way not to get into trouble, which might result in long-term suspension.

That's it, really.

That one in every five can't meet this minuscule standard speaks badly for not only our education system, but also for our future.

Yes, we are blessed with plenty of gifted students. Each year, thousands of Kansans graduate from high school with every honor imaginable. They go onto college and, God willing, enter the work force and become valuable and contributing members of society. It's just the way the system was intended to work.

But if a chain is judged by its weakest link, what are we to make of the fact that one of every five students isn't graduating from high school? What does the future hold for this person? Is this the reason we have an ongoing issue regarding overcrowding in our prison system?

The new method being used by the state board was required by the U.S. Department of Education. The graduation rate of 89.1 percent in 2009 included those who took longer than four years. State officials said they were surprised the new method, which required graduation within four years, had such a dramatic impact on this year's graduation rate.

Next year's rates might give a better indication, they added.

Perhaps. However, it's clear this state is not receiving passing marks at this point – no matter the formula being used – with regard to preparing students for the real world.

– *The Hutchinson News, via The Associated Press*

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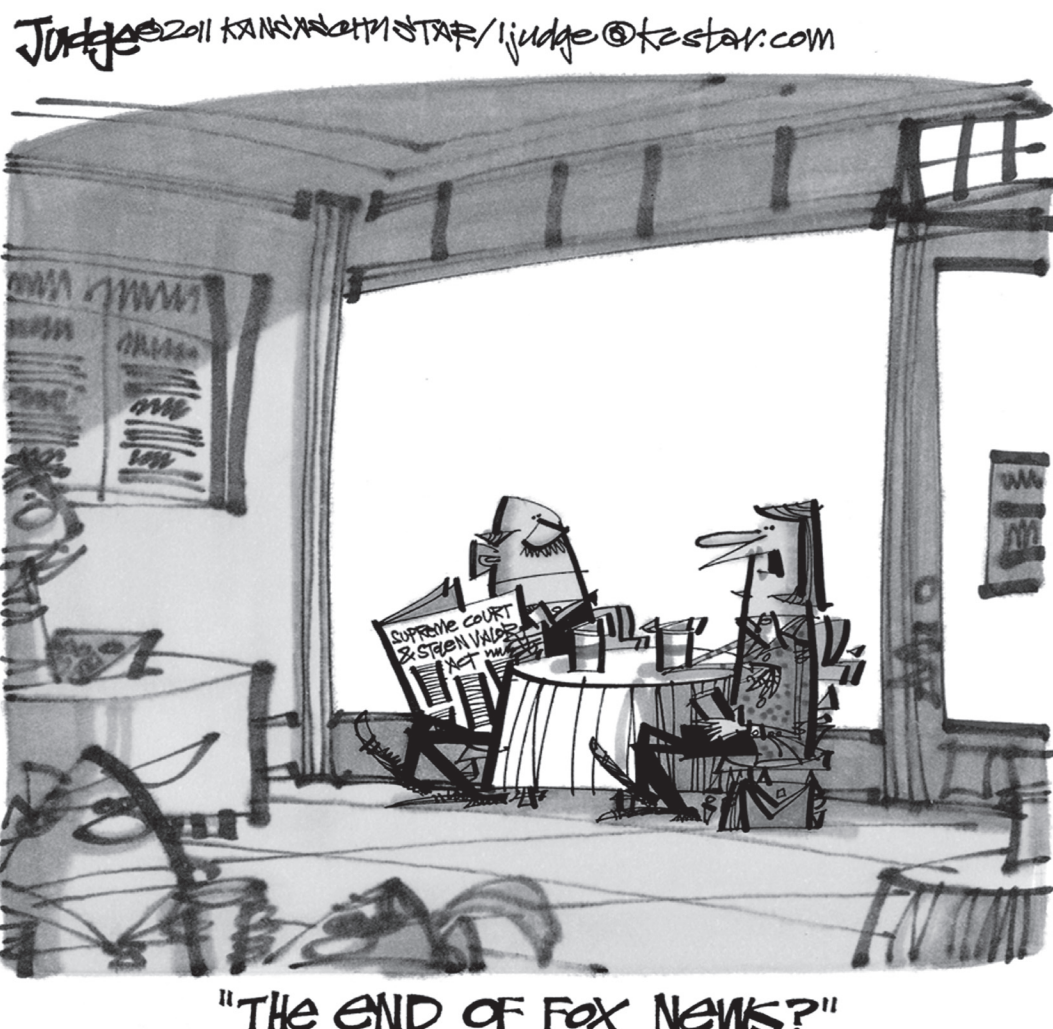
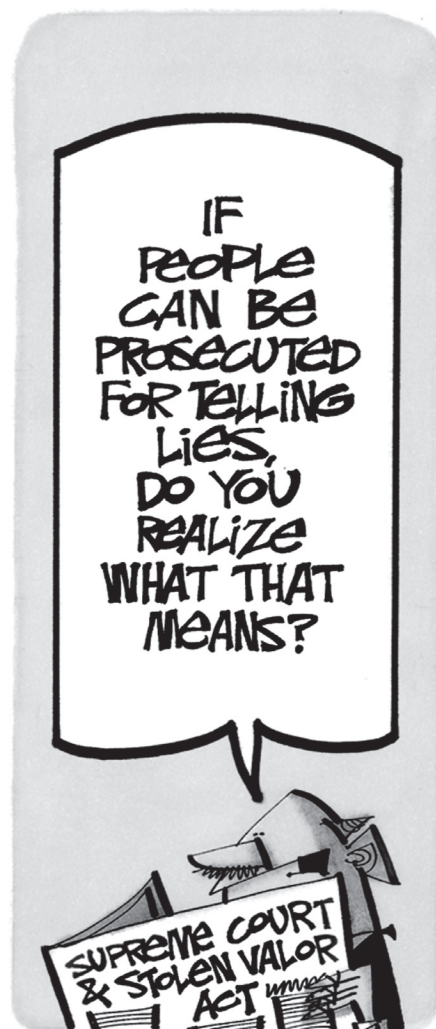
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Lessons abound on farm harvest tour

It seems I read somewhere that learning can help keep the mind sharp no matter the age of the mind. Boy, I hope that is true!

Recently I was given a "farm tour" by Sheila and Ken Frahm that came with several new lessons in short order.

We had tried more than once to do the tour, but something kept coming up.

The first thing I learned was about the road system and how it works. That was certainly a helpful lesson to start out with. I hope I don't have to remember all the details, but I think I might be able to find my way back to town.

They were trying to show me as much as they could in one afternoon. I learned about the different pieces of equipment necessary to bring a crop to market. To my untrained eye, some of these pieces looked like giant bugs and others like alien life forms. I was like a kid in a candy store wanting to know how each one works and why it was necessary. Thankfully, Sheila and Ken are very patient teachers.

The weather was VERY windy, to say the least, and there were times when we had to stop and let the dust blow off the windshield to be able to see. We finally arrived at the quarter section being harvested that day and more lessons were started.

Ken explained the watering system and how and why it works. I had taken for granted that they worked by magic, but apparently they do have a system that makes sense. From an air-



Sharon Friedlander

• Musings

plane these systems create a beautiful pattern on the landscape of half circles and full circles depending on the land use. Up close, the system looks really big and complicated.

We went to one end of the cornfield where the combine and grain wagon were waiting for a truck to transfer their load to so they could continue harvesting. I was invited to climb up into the cab of the combine and ride along to see how it actually harvested the corn.

I was intrigued by the onboard computer system that told the operator, Ed, all the information he needed. The screen told him when the combine was 3/4 full of corn and what percentage of moisture there was in the corn being harvested. Ken had already told me how the percentage of moisture determines where this corn will be used. Today's harvest was headed to a Leoti feedyard as cattle feed, because of the moisture still left in the ears.

The combine harvested 12 rows set on 30-inch centers at a time; it was amazing to watch in action. The grain cart ran alongside to be

filled as the ears were harvested. We turned at the end of the field and moved on to the next rows. At the end of these rows we were full up and so was the grain cart, so both combine and grain cart waited for the grain truck to unload. As I climbed down, I watched the grain being transferred and it was quite a show.

While Ken was explaining the irrigation system, he pointed out the small plot of land at the corners was planted in native grasses to help hold soil and moisture on these corners. There is another valuable reason to keep these corners in native plants as this provides a habitat for game birds. When we arrived at the end of the rows of corn we had 19 gorgeous pheasants fly up – Ken and Sheila counted them somehow as they all flew up at once.

When we left the cornfield, we went up another dirt road. There was a wash that was also planted in grasses. We saw deer moving through the far end and antelope on the far side. This wash catches water and keeps the runoff in the grass so soil isn't lost and moisture is held. Maintaining these simple areas keeps the land conserved for future generations.

It was a great learning experience and Sheila and Ken were great hosts. I hope I was a good guest.

Sharon Friedlander, publisher of the Colby Free Press, enjoys reading, hot rods and critters. Contact her at sfriedlander@nwkansas.com.

Creative measures preserve resources

We live a special way of life in Kansas that is worth preserving for future generations, and critical to that way of life are our state's plentiful natural resources. From land and water to wildlife and energy sources, we rely on natural resources to meet our daily needs.

Kansans understand this, and are working together in a variety of ways to conserve these resources for the future. Eleven years ago, I held my first Partners in Conservation Tour to learn more about the conservation efforts underway in our state. I recently held my 2011 tour in south central Kansas which focused on water conservation. Our lakes, rivers and aquifers provide clean water for Kansas to drink, but the importance of water does not stop there; it is the lifeblood of our municipalities, a foundation for recreation, and will direct the future of manufacturing and production agriculture.

This year's tour, which included nine stops in Harvey, Sedgwick, Butler and Greenwood Counties, gave me the opportunity to learn how farmers, ranchers and business owners are partnering with municipalities, conservation groups and government agencies to improve our state's water resources.

The tour began in Halstead, northwest of Wichita, where we learned about the Equus Beds Aquifer – the principal source of fresh water for south central Kansas. For the 550,000 Kansans who rely on this aquifer for drinking water, its dropping water level and encroaching saltwater plumes are of real concern. The water level has dropped by 40 feet since the 1940s because water is being consumed faster than nature can replenish it. This depletion has allowed for saltwater plumes from the Arkansas River to encroach upon fresh groundwater.

There are two ways to reverse the dropping water level in the aquifer: First, we must re-



U.S. Senator Jerry Moran

• Moran's Memo

duce the amount of water being withdrawn. Farmers irrigating from the aquifer use large quantities of water to grow their crops – but they have also led the way in finding innovative methods to reduce their water usage. Farmers like Steven Smith of Halstead have partnered with the Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service to improve their irrigation systems, resulting in less water consumption without reducing crop yields.

Second, we must increase the amount of water recharging the aquifer. I visited the city of Wichita to learn about its innovative program, which takes flood water from the Little Arkansas River, purifies it to drinking water standards, and returns it to the aquifer. As the water is pumped into the aquifer, it creates a barrier that forces back saltwater plumes. With one in five Kansans relying on the Equus Beds aquifer for clean water, the success of this joint local, state and federal initiative matters.

During the second day of the tour, we visited the Diamond R Ranch near Fall River, where ranch owners Darrell and Dee Rolph – along with ranch managers Harold and Travis Stapleford – have a forward-thinking livestock operation. The ranch places high importance on providing quality drinking water to their cow calf and stocker herd, and has fenced in nine ponds to protect them from contamination. Thanks to the Conservation Reserve Program and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, the ranch has also installed filter strips

and field borders around cropland to improve water quality. As a result, the sickness rate of the Rolphs' herd has decreased by one-third.

We then visited El Dorado, where I learned more about the unique, cost-effective wastewater treatment operation the city has put into place. In 2007, the city of El Dorado was the first community in Kansas to develop a wetland as a way of helping treat wastewater – resulting in a savings of \$4 million. Without the wetland, El Dorado would have needed to build a large – and much more expensive – wastewater treatment facility.

The conservation tour ended at El Dorado Reservoir – an 8,000-acre recreation destination for south central Kansas that has great fishing, swim beaches and a full-service marina. At the lake, we learned about the partnership between Newman University, Burns & McDonnell Engineering, and J&S Leasing in proposing a 177-acre whitewater river wetland and stream mitigation bank in El Dorado. The bank would work to reduce pollution while also providing a diverse and ecologically sound aquatic habitat.

This year's Partners in Conservation Tour was a terrific opportunity for participants to showcase new conservation practices. To learn more about all nine stops, please visit my website at moran.senate.gov. It is great news that municipalities like Wichita and El Dorado, innovative farmers and business owners, and universities and government agencies are partnering together to make certain Kansas remains as beautiful and rich in natural resources in the future as it is today.

Jerry Moran of Hays is the junior U.S. senator from Kansas. His committee appointments include Appropriations; Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs; Veterans Affairs; Small Business and Entrepreneurship; and the Special Committee on Aging.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

