



Other Viewpoints

Commission needs Open Meetings Act

The vacancy in the executive director's position at the Kansas Corporation Commission may be one positive step toward fixing what ails that agency, but there is much more work to be done before it regains the public's trust.

Patti Petersen-Klein's departure last week from the executive director's post, however that was accomplished, certainly appeared to be necessary to smooth a serious rift that had developed between upper management and staff employees.

Equally damaging to the commission's credibility, and perhaps even more so, is the news that the agency's three commissioners have a habit of ruling on issues that come before them without benefit of public hearings, which is a clear violation of the Kansas Open Meetings Act.

How that transgression will be handled is unknown at this point, but it's clear that Gov. Sam Brownback will have to pay closer attention to what's going on in the Corporation Commission's corner of the world. The governor appoints the commissioners, and the group's chairman appoints the executive director.

The recent failings, up and down the line, of those in charge at the commission reflect badly on Brownback and the job of restoring trust in the agency falls to him.

Brownback has appointed two of the current commissioners, including chairman Mark Sievers, who hired Petersen-Klein. The third member, Tom Wright, was appointed by former Gov. Kathleen Sebelius and re-appointed by former Gov. Mark Parkinson.

The commissioners and Petersen-Klein had approved a rate increase of more than 100 percent for a small Salina utility whose customers include residents of a subdivision north of that city. Rather than conduct a public hearing on the utility's request for an increase in rates, commissioners and Petersen-Klein met individually with a Corporation Commission attorney to give their positions on the proposed rate hike.

The Citizens' Utility Ratepayer Board subsequently sent letters to Kansas Attorney General Derek Schmidt and Shawnee County District Attorney Chad Taylor noting the individual meetings represented binding action on the part of the Corporation Commission without first approving the rate hike during a public meeting.

Topeka lawyer Mike Merriam said the practice used to approve the rate increase constituted a serial meeting, which is illegal under the Kansas Open Meetings Act.

The process used was known within the Corporation Commission as "pink sheeting" and apparently was an accepted way of doing business there.

Regardless of how prevalent "pink sheeting" was, it is illegal and not an acceptable way of doing the public's business.

Before Sievers hires the Corporation Commission's next executive director, someone needs to inform commissioners their performance is falling short of what is required from people in charge of such an important agency and demand better.

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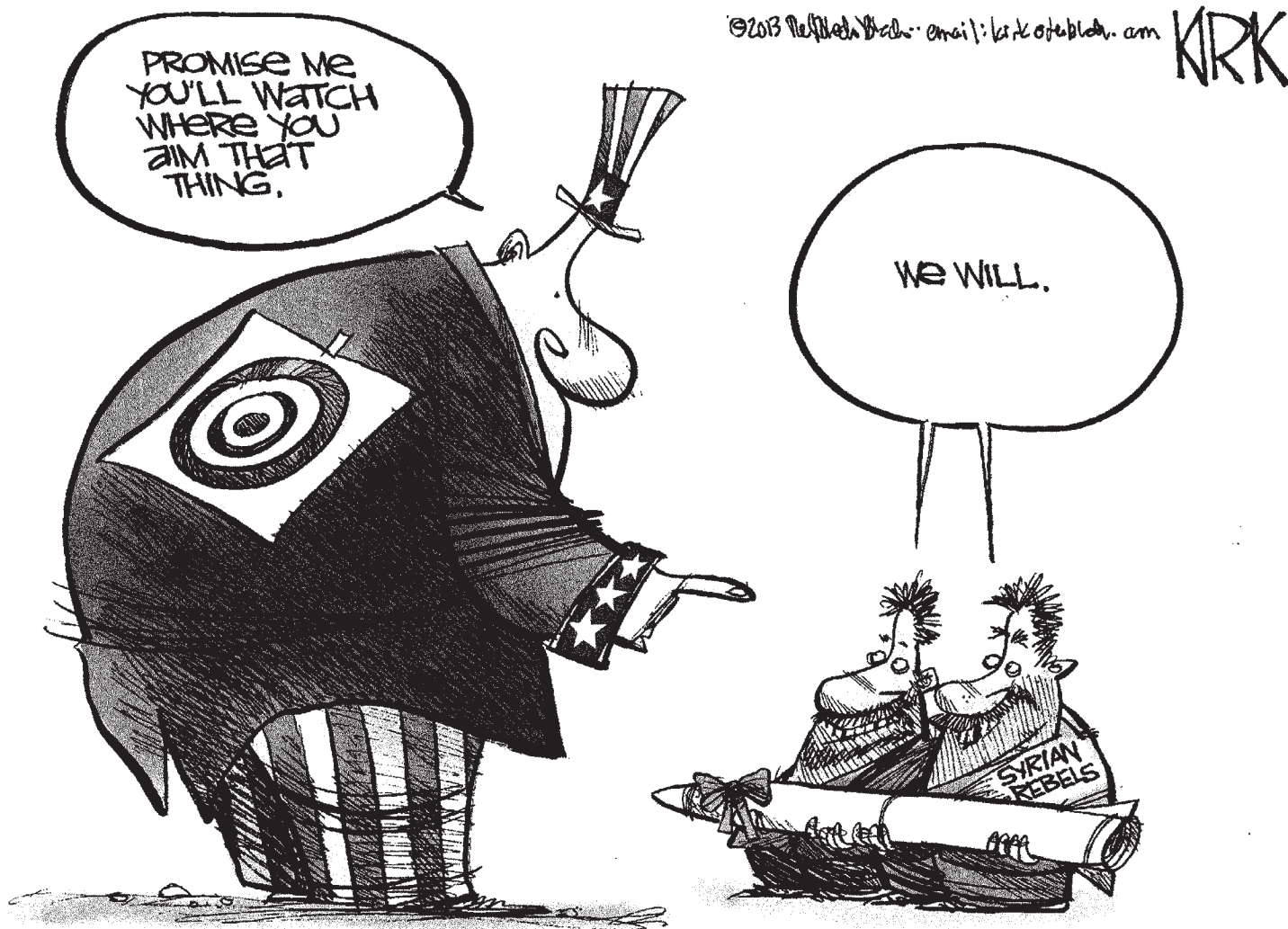
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Commercial baby food really adds up

My one-year-old son recently hit another growth spurt, characterized by his suddenly increased appetite. Some days it seems like he can eat his weight in baby food!

Baby food didn't seem so expensive when he first started eating a few tablespoons a day as a four-month-old, but if I purchased commercially prepared baby food for him now, I could easily spend three or four times as much on his meals as my own.

My grandmothers would probably laugh at the idea of buying prepared baby food. I'm sure they never dreamed of buying tiny, expensive jars when they could easily make their own.

But, with the variety of choices in our local markets, it seems so much more convenient to just fill the grocery cart with jars or tubs from the baby aisle instead of raw ingredients to make my own at home. It isn't so convenient when I feel the pain in my grocery budget, though!

Fortunately, I can prepare plenty of homemade baby food for my munchkin at a fraction of the cost — without much time or effort. And, I know exactly what's in it, which makes me feel good even if it doesn't make much nutri-



Heather Alwin

• Frankly Frugal

tional difference.

You can actually make several weeks' worth of food in just a half hour or so. All you need is a blender, some raw or frozen fruits or veggies and lots of little plastic containers, ice cube trays or snack-size sandwich baggies.

Start by making your chosen fruits or veggies into a texture that will be easy to mash. For sweet potatoes (my little guy's favorite), this means peeling, slicing and steaming to a soft consistency. For frozen peas (not at all a favorite at our house), this means boiling them for about three minutes until they are soft. For bananas, this just means peeling.

Next, put the prepared veggie or fruit in the blender and add a bit of cool water to make blending easier. Blend until you have a nice smoothie-like texture, adding more water as

necessary to get the texture your baby likes.

Pour the smoothie into your container of choice. I liked ice cube trays when my son was younger, but he goes through too much food now to make them practical. We now use very small disposable food containers—the kind intended for dressings and dips. Fill them almost to the top and freeze.

I make a big batch of each item, cutting down on the mess and time. And I don't worry if I end up with a gallon of sweet potatoes because they went on sale and I stocked up. He'll eat them and they keep just fine in the freezer.

I think my grandmothers would be proud to know that I'm carrying on a tradition of making my own baby food and I know my wallet is happier this way.

But, I have noticed that homemade baby food doesn't taste any better when my little one spits it back in my face!

Heather Alwin is the society editor for the Colby Free Press and blogs at kansaslifewordpress.com. Before moving to Kansas, she was a lawyer with the U.S. Air Force. Alwin lives in Brewster with her husband and son.

Positive regard helps students grow

"There is only one most beautiful child in the world, and every mother has it." This Chinese proverb speaks to our human capacity to love others, regardless of their objective beauty.

But our children grow into adults, some of whom populate our prisons or live lives of depressed helplessness or are terribly offensive to others. Similar to many teachers I know, I try to look past that surface to see that child that they once were. For nearly every one of them was an innocent baby, a toddler awed at their world, a playful child who giggled with playmates.

What we see in our littlest children is "potential." It is our hope that they can become anyone they want to be. Parents are the first and primary teachers of their children. And the close community around a child is formative too. And some children inherit some limitations. By the time they enter elementary school, it is obvious that regardless of what we say, not everyone can grow up to become President.

As teachers we sometimes say that meeting the parents helps us forgive the students. But our job as teachers is not to change parents but to grow students. In America, that job has two parts. We teach language or math or (in my case) biology. But there is a second side to a teacher's job.

I have a delightful retired colleague who, when someone says "You taught biology, didn't you?" responds with "No, I taught students."

So, yes, he did teach biology-to-students. But not only did his students learn plants and animals and DNA, but they also learned to grow as young ladies and gentlemen. Be kind. Be responsible. Respect adults, classmates, and especially themselves.

More or less, American teachers are surrogate parents. And our students can really make mistakes. We actually learn a lot by making mistakes. Mistakes are important in life. And recovering failure is an important life skill. Misspelling a word or getting the math wrong



John Richard Schrock

• Education Frontlines

is not the end of the earth. Teachers have no trouble getting a student back on track with lessons.

It is the misbehavior or mistakes in growing up socially that the teacher has to manage. Good teachers in America have to have a little "cop" in them because misbehavior cannot be ignored. For the good student who is remorseful and realizes "I shouldn't have done that," the teacher is glad to have them back the next day to start over with a clean slate. It is part of growing up. This "unconditional positive regard" gives students the room to grow.

But there is a limit to positive regard. A student who continues bad behavior will exhaust that good will. The real world is not forgiving. School teachers are justified in having limits on what can be tolerated.

Unfortunately some American schools have seen a rise in misbehavior. In earlier times, if you got in trouble at school, you got in trouble again when you got home. Unfortunately, those days are pretty much gone. Today some elementary children who, having misbehaved badly and been corralled by the teacher, threaten "Wait till my mom hears about this!" And sure enough, mom shows up at school the next day with no better behavior than her child. Sometimes meeting the parent ends forgiveness for both.

I never see such behavior here in China. My teaching colleagues here have a minimum of 60 students per class. They are teachers mainly in the first sense — they teach language or math or biology. Because of the sheer numbers, they rarely deal with behavior or personal issues. They don't have to. If a child "acts up," there is another child waiting to take their seat and

who will be very well behaved.

We should revisit our compulsory school attendance laws that to some extent guarantee students a seat regardless of their behavior. Detention and alternate schools are just legal dodges.

Would the mother above last many days with her bratty child at home with her? There should be no right to an education without the parent and child also assuming the responsibility for education too.

We focus on "rights." China focuses on "responsibility."

We don't need to adopt the Chinese culture.

We just need to get back to supporting our teachers.

John Richard Schrock, currently in western China, is a professor of biology and department chair at a leading teacher's college, lives in Emporia. He emphasizes that his opinions are strictly his own.

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