



Other Viewpoints

Changing system of federal earmarks takes time, thought

All the hubbub surrounding Rep. Lynn Jenkins' first personal encounter with the federal earmark system probably was to be expected, given that she spent a lot of time railing against it during the campaign last fall.

We hope that's all behind us now so Jenkins can get on with what she was elected to do and the Club for Growth can get on with whatever it does, besides looking silly.

Despite her avowed distaste for the earmark system, Jenkins did come around to saying during her campaign battle with Democrat incumbent Nancy Boyda that she would use it to seek funding for projects that serve a federal purpose.

She has, to the tune of \$68 million, and we don't have a problem with that. As a matter of fact, we think she would have been politically naive not to use the system to help her constituents — and her re-election efforts — in the state's 2nd Congressional District.

The news value of her earmark requests actually appeared to have waned until the Club for Growth stumbled all over itself by erroneously reporting April 22 that Jenkins had crawfished on a pledge not to seek them.

Actually, she had pledged to request earmarks only for projects with a federal purpose. Club for Growth had mistakenly placed her name on the list of those who had pledged off all earmarks and had to apologize for its error....

Refusing to request earmarks for the 2nd Congressional District wouldn't shrink the federal budget. The money that doesn't flow into northeast Kansas will simply flow elsewhere.

Call it pork if you will, rail against it if you must and try to change it if you wish. That's fine. But as long as the earmark system is in place, it would be wise to continue using it.

That Jenkins has accepted that not using earmarks will do her more harm than good indicates she may be a realist at heart, and that's not a bad thing to be in Washington.

Realists make good politicians, and they seem to develop a knack for getting things done.

— Topeka Capital-Journal, via The Associated Press

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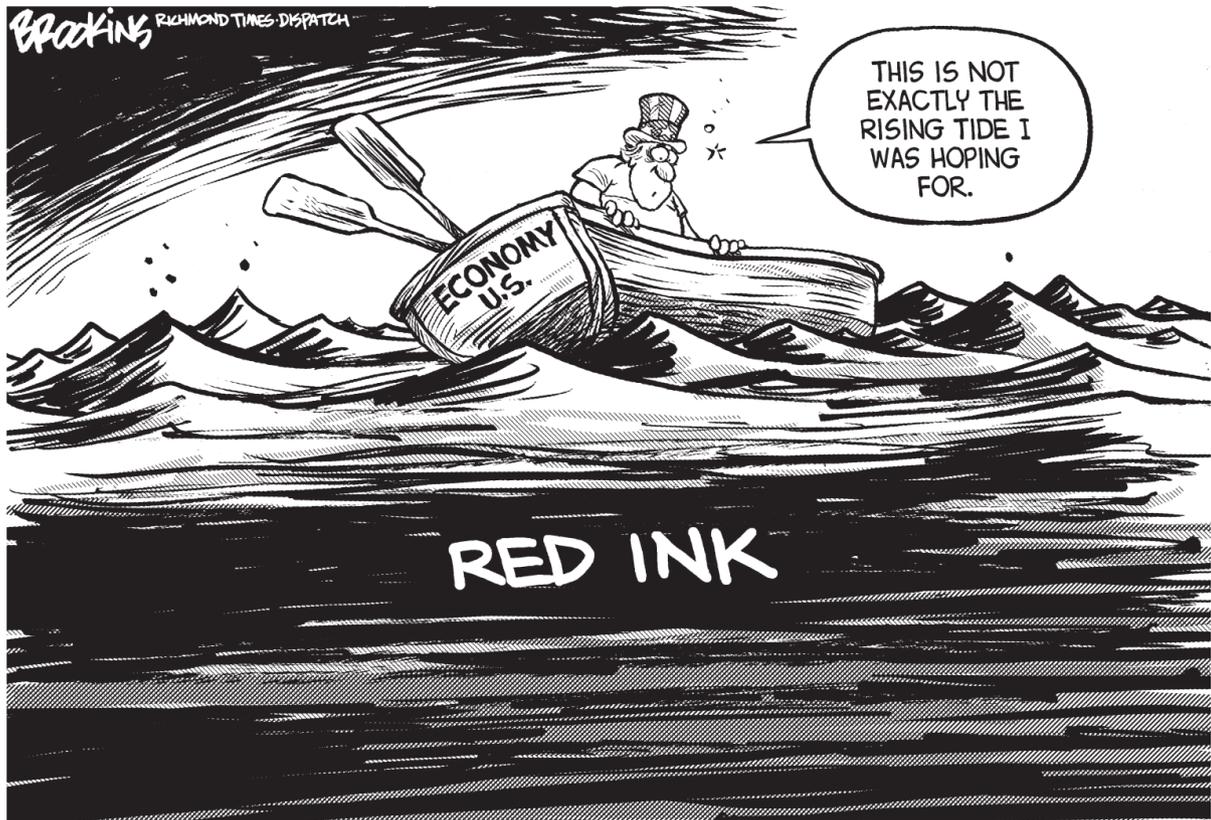
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Scholarships could help autistic kids

Rep. Lance Kinzer and Rep. Mike Kiegerl, Republicans from Olathe, have introduced an interesting and potentially significant piece of legislation.

House Bill 2227 would give families of autistic students the ability to better match educational services to the needs of their children.

Giving scholarships to special-needs students, as this bill does, is not a new idea. As I described in a report recently published by the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy, five states have scholarship programs for special-needs students.

Many of these students thrive thanks to the services that their local public schools provide, but some of them need alternatives. They need to seek out help from another school district, a private school, a tutoring company, a speech therapist or another professional.

State-funded scholarship programs in Arizona, Florida, Georgia and Utah serve students with any number of disabilities, including autism. Florida's McKay scholarship program is the oldest, having been around since 2001. Today it helps close to 20,000 students.

Parents love the program, saying that it means their children are more likely to receive services they need and face fewer social problems. Utah has the Carson Smith Scholarship program for special-needs students. The legislative auditor general found that even parents who decided to return their children to their local district believe that the program is worthwhile.

Ohio takes a different approach. Since 2004, it has had a program specifically for students

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with autism. Last school year, roughly 150 service providers and 750 students participated.

So the Kinzer-Kiegerl proposal is not radical, but follows in the wake of well-respected predecessors. Still, opponents say that at best, they are half-measures that neglect the bulk of students. True enough; they are limited. Then again, these students need more help than most, so why not give it to them?

As a subcategory of special-needs students, autistic students already have rights specified under a federal law known as IDEA. Schools are required to create an Individual Education Plan for them.

The Kinzer-Kiegerl bill would use district-devised plans as the baseline for estimating a scholarship granted by the state Board of Education, which parents could use at a private or public school.

Who could be opposed to helping kids with autism? The Kansas National Education Association, for one. The state's largest teacher union, says the plan would drain money from public schools. I might ask, "Who's more important: the child in need or the system?"

Happily, we don't have to choose. Susan

Aud, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, looked at the Ohio program. She estimated it saved the state \$1 million in just two years. So much for draining the system. Legislators could reinvest that money elsewhere in education.

Rep. Judith Loganbill, a Wichita Democrat, has expressed concern about which services families will be able to use. She says that the bill doesn't define a "nonpublic school."

Does this mean that parents will be able to claim a check from the state, enroll their non-autistic children in a phony school and then spend the money in a casino? Hardly.

School districts will still be involved in identifying who is autistic and who is not. And under the proposal, the state board would determine the "requirements relating to the eligibility and participation of nonpublic schools."

There are details to be worked out, but if anyone is concerned about the future of an autistic child, it's his or her parents. A scholarship program for kids with autism could save taxpayer money, and more importantly, let families customize an education plan for these extraordinary students.

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Are popular teachers also good?

Bonuses for being a popular teacher are coming to colleges. The chancellor of Texas A&M University is offering up to \$10,000 to professors based on end-of-year evaluations by students.

But many faculty members worry that evaluations are a popularity contest. And the A&M Faculty Senate passed a resolution opposing it.

The professors are correct to reject this scheme. A study in 1973 by three researchers — Naftulin, Ware, and Donnelly — discovered the "Dr. Fox Effect." They hired a professional actor and coached him to "lecture" with great enthusiasm and confidence, using humorous anecdotes. The fraudulent "Dr. Myron L. Fox" was introduced as an authority on the application of mathematics to human behavior.

He lectured to three classes using contradictory statements and double talk that was carefully rehearsed to avoid any real content. In the question-and-answer sessions, he replied "with meaningless references to unrelated topics." But he was very elegant and entertaining and all three audiences responded favorably. No one detected "Dr. Fox" as a fraud.

Students commented: "Lively examples ... good analysis of subject ... he was certainly captivating ... knowledgeable." One person even indicated having read one of the speaker's (nonexistent) publications.

So Dr. Fox got rave reviews for empty entertainment. More recent studies continue to confirm that most students easily confuse entertainment with teaching.

At Kansas regents' schools, we must use student evaluations and we try to get beyond



John Richard Schrock

● **Education Frontlines**

the entertainment factor. Was the teacher well prepared? Organized? Available during office hours? Clear in presentation? Does he/she answer students' questions?

But these questions, rated on a 1-to-5 scale, are a general and often trivial probe of the rich context of complex face-to-face classroom interactions.

"Does the teacher stimulate students to grow intellectually?" is a question that cannot be given a 1-to-5 number.

While the Dr. Fox effect gave students "the illusion of having learned," the numerical evaluation forms often give administrators and their assessment staff an equally false "illusion of having evaluated." It is no more valid to evaluate teaching by number than it is to put a number ranking on the Mona Lisa.

Good teachers do thrive on the written comments on evaluations. Teaching is a complex art that cannot be broken into a checklist. But our language is complex enough and some college students should be talented and self aware enough to be able to characterize some of the intellectual growth they achieve in their classes. And no written student survey is as good as teacher evaluation by direct observation by a team of veteran colleagues.

Yet many good students will not recognize, at the time they complete a class, how productive much of their grueling, exhausting coursework will be until years later when they begin to apply their mastery in the workplace or in advanced study. Only then do many students realize that the hard their old teacher helped them develop skills that an easy-but-entertaining teacher might not have.

We live in a new age, when students use on-line databanks such as "Pick-a-Prof" to find easy teachers. There's a strong correlation between giving easy grades and high student evaluations.

The Texas A&M proposal not only rewards easy classes and entertainment, but also sends the unpopular teachers in to observe and copy these professors. But we are a profession, not a company trying to make "student customers" happy. The lesson from Dr. Fox is that following that path leads to colleges of entertainment.

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Mallard Fillmore

● **Bruce Tinsley**

