

No Standing News

Since we have no standing, we stand with those left standing

Volume II

January 13, 2004

Number 07

The “Carnage” Strategy

District creates phony budget for political demonstration

For all of you who have read the dire stories about the school board’s budget ‘crisis’ and are concerned - particularly if you are one of those whose job is threatened - you are at least entitled to know that the ‘crisis’ is being manufactured purely for political reasons and this is how it happened.

It began at the annual **Missouri School Board’s Association** meeting at Lake of the Ozarks in October. That’s where the MSBA gathers their board member groupies in for their yearly refresher courses on, “How to Feel Important Without Really Doing Anything to Improve Education.” This annual romp costs about \$10,000+/- for our board and administrators to attend in force. While our board members were attending the MSBA How To meetings: How To win their next school board election, How To squeeze more money out of local taxpayers, How To find bargains at the Outlet Mall or How To skip the meetings and play golf, the Superintendents were huddled with the **Education Roundtable***(see footnote) to plan their latest political masterstroke - the “**Carnage Strategy**.” With the next state budget deficit estimated to be from \$250 million to \$1 billion (depending on which partisan revenue guess you prefer) they fear it will be their turn to “feel the pain.” It was easy to figure out that “Feeling the pain” was the theme of their discussion because Superintendents across the state used the same ‘pain’ hyperbole in their hometown press releases the following week. For this group of six-figure executives ‘pain’ consists of a slowdown in their accelerating executive salaries and perks, money for their innovative programs (read ‘pork’) to reinvent education and most particularly their cherished status as the most powerful special interest gang in the state.

The “Carnage Strategy.” The Education Roundtable decided that they would hook their fortunes to Governor Holden’s square-wheeled bandwagon. The first step was to create phony budgets (the ‘Carnage Budgets’) in every member school district to use at a big rally when the Legislature reconvened after Christmas. Carnage budgets would panic teachers and parents into putting pressure on the Republican majority to restore “their” money and reinforce the privileged status of K-12 education. Slash and burn budget cuts would teach those pinchpenny conservatives to keep their Republican paws off K-12’s money and help their Ole Buddy Holden at the same time. It’s always a brilliant strategy to threaten politicians for money; like stealing dinner from hyenas.

Superintendents and school boards were to go home, slap together budgets with cuts in *only* the most sensitive areas; bring them to Jefferson City sometime in January or February for a carefully staged Legislative Show and Tell. This jump-start in the normal budget process, which doesn’t really get serious until April, must have bewildered thousands of baffled board members who have been trained by MSBA to leave all budget decisions to the Superintendents and who normally aren’t allowed to see and rubber stamp their budgets until just days before the June 30 state deadline. Just after the legislative session starts (so the plan goes), mobs of angry parents, outraged teachers, honor students, weeping tots and Superintendents would flood the capital waving their crisis budgets. Dramatic testimonials would be staged for the media; the shamed Republicans would bow to the political might of the powerful Education Roundtable and turn their budget knives on the sick, elderly, orphans and the handicapped.

There’s just one problem. Holden is the first governor in memory who became a lame duck before he had sobered up enough to apologize for throwing a million dollar inauguration party - after that, things really went downhill. Holden is unlikely to survive his own party primary and that’s the prediction of a number of loyal Democrats. (It’s *not* true the party put out a contract on him.) This is a Presidential election year and even if Holden survives McCaskill’s primary shredder, Bush badly needs Missouri’s electoral votes which means the RNC will be pouring very serious money into Missouri’s election - enough to make even Congressman Blunt’s little boy our next governor. If that weren’t enough, there are signs that the Democratic minority is becoming embarrassed by the Roundtable’s arrogant demands for money. This could be due to the perennially lousy state test scores, it could be due to the fact that they are being sued by the education lobby *again* to get a judge to give them the keys to the state treasury, or it could be due to globs of pork that keep oozing out of bloated school budgets to the mortification of education supporters in both parties. During the budget battle last year, after listening to months of whining and treats and scraping together as much extra cash as they could for K-12, some legislators checked on the raises school administrators across the state received out of that hard fought money “for the children.” As they suspected the cream had been skimmed off straight into big raises for administrators. The fact that the Superintendents of even little districts like ours make more money than the governor of the state isn’t lost on anyone except the nitwits on the Education Roundtable.

(Gov. Holden - \$120,086; Superintendent Adams - \$124,372)

The march on Jefferson City is being touted by the Roundtable as “the biggest protest in Missouri’s history.” Their long-time Democratic friends are expected to stand shoulder to shoulder with them. If they do manage to make that big a stink it will become tactically difficult or impossible for the Democratic minority to snatch enough crumbs from the majority table to hang onto their seats until term limits wipe them out. Several Democrats have let it be known that they will be at the side of dying grandmothers on whichever day this demonstration takes place.

Action Plan in action. On October 31st, fresh from their MSBA smoke-filled room, Superintendent Adams announced to the RDN that \$2 million would have to be cut out of the '04-'05 budget. It would be “*another bleak financial year*” Adams said. They would “*cut most what is least essential to our core mission*” he proclaimed. (Will Girl’s Golf, Gender Equity or Supermarket Careers be asked to fall on their swords?) Unless, Adams threatened, the Missouri Legislature provided more funding for education, “*likely [they] will require the state to ask voters to approve a tax increase.*” (You could see that one coming a mile away.) Adams and the board had decided on October 30th that committees would be appointed to make recommendations to the board. Each of the committees would be chaired by administrators to guard against anyone getting off script and asking why Administration’s salaries and jobs weren’t first on the list of cuts and in fact, why they weren’t on the list at all.

The reason Adams and the board tasked committees with this job was threefold: 1. It looks democratic, without actually being so, 2. It gives them cover when the bullets start flying and, 3. The board can’t make these decisions because they’ve never done anything with a budget except vote to pass it. Our board *spends* money - they have no concept of how *not* to spend it. The board’s unfamiliarity with the budget and how the school system really operates was vividly demonstrated on December 18th when the committees reported back with three different versions of proposed cuts ranging from \$1.6 million to \$4 million. The board couldn’t understand how the proposed cuts would work and couldn’t decide what to do so they did what they always do- they gave up and left the decisions to the administrators.

Teachers drafted into MSBA lobby machine. Next, Adams and Berkbuegler met with teachers during what was supposed to be a paid CSD work day (classes dismissed for ½ day) to tell them that because of the *&%# Republicans they wouldn’t get their raises, some would lose jobs, classes would be crammed full etc., etc. etc. The teachers were instructed to contact our state legislators, Steelman and May, (both being *&%# Republicans) and tell them about the “carnage” that would take place if they didn’t change their attitudes. When the budget committees reported in on December 12th, the (hand-picked) Citizen’s Focus Committee came up with \$4 million in cuts and the

Superintendent and Asst. Supers committee came up with only \$1.2 million. It really didn’t matter because this unusually early budget was a phony. After parading their “carnage” budgets at the capital they will have to do a real school budget. What sells at an out of town rally to threaten legislators may not necessarily sell well at home.

The heartless part of this little political charade is that our clueless teachers and school employees are naturally spooked about losing their jobs. They don’t understand why the budget is being finished this year when the process is normally just beginning and they don’t know that the threats to eliminate 55 jobs are just a political tactic. Our school board could have ordered administration to put everything on the table *except jobs*, as many school boards did last year when they started reducing expenses to prepare for cuts for this year, but you’ll notice our school board hasn’t done that.

Unleashing the Business Partners. The next stage was a November 10th luncheon meeting with the Business Partners at RTI hosted by Adams and the school board. (With ‘carnage’ looming they host luncheons?) Adams and the board unveiled the “Carnage Strategy” to their favorite tax-and-spend local boosters by explaining the early budget with \$2 million in cuts must be done by January 9th “*so state legislators will know what effect their financial maneuverings have on public schools.*” (“Their maneuverings?” That’s the pot calling the kettle black.) “*I’d like when the legislators go back to Jefferson City for them to cast votes with full knowledge of what they’re doing to our schools,*” Adams said. That was when Adams said the only word for failing to fully fund the School Foundation Formula was “CARNAGE!” Warming to his Carnage theme he told the Business Partners, “*There’s no way to cut large amounts of money from our already stretched budget without some degree of pain.*” Is he referring to the same “overstretched budget” that gave administrators 5% raises, added \$400,000 to their new office building, started a huge new soccer stadium and began an \$8.5 million expansion of three grade schools without being sure \$8.5 million would cover the costs? Yes, it’s the same ‘stretched’ budget. By underfunding education, Adams concluded, “*we’re cutting the lifeblood of our future.*” Listen carefully and you can hear the hoof beats of Famine, War and Pestilence.

Committee recommendations notwithstanding, the cuts Adams and the administrators have already decided upon would eliminate about 55 teachers (so classrooms can be crammed with bodies for great photographic effect during the '05 levy campaign), cut elective classes, cut support staff, cut federally subsidized programs and grant matches and cut athletics and student organizations. Notice they carefully selected areas that will raise the greatest howls of protest from parents.

We’re sure none of the Business Partners sitting through this apocalyptic vision of the future knew that the school budget is \$34 million (\$40 million including reserves) and that thanks to automatic real estate reassessment their revenue from the property tax grows exponentially every two years. You could take \$2 million out of the budget by eliminating 5 assistant principals, all-expense paid junketing

for administrators and program directors and fat bits here and there such as limiting cell phone use and not wasting paper printing copies of the budget for the school board. The kiddies would never notice the “carnage” or feel the “lifeblood” draining out of their little bodies.

A bump in the Road to Carnage. On November 16, just after Adams’ “Carnage” speech, the state revealed that over 200 of Missouri’s schools had failed to make “adequate yearly progress” on standardized tests in mathematics, communications arts or both subjects. The only explanation was that the “standards were too high” and probably will be lowered so in future we would give the appearance of scoring higher without actually doing so. The revelation of what a lousy job they are doing with the billions spent on K-12 education should have been an embarrassment to all these so-called education professionals except they have perfected ironclad alibis over the years. All their failures to educate are due to: bad parents, decaying morals of society, video games, rap music, baggy pants or all of the above. The Rolla school board had spent a tedious hour on October 10th looking at overheads and listening to **Curriculum Director Giger** explain why the Rolla MAP scores don’t live up to our Blue Ribbon image. Curriculum Director Giger (\$94,860+ per year) finally admitted he didn’t have a clue. That’s why he gets the big bucks.

On November 19, 2003, TIF committee members Terry Adams and Keith Strassner voted to give away school tax revenues in the TIF zone for 13 to 23 years. We think the message was that the school district is so flush it doesn’t need all the taxes voters gave them *or* they do need the taxes but their “partnership” with the city is more important to them than education *or* since they think they got a small rebate concession (which will never materialize) they had to kowtow to the city even if they had to sacrifice taxes because education isn’t really that important *or...* well, you figure it out.

The Hannibal Lector Budget Policy. The board set aside the “Carnage Budget” and played with the only thing they’re really good at - spending money. Still without actual bids on the grade school expansions but faced with imminent “carnage,” the board demonstrated their fiscal zeal by adopting their first ever budget policy. Here it is: *they will spend no more than 10% of the reserves each year to accommodate their chronic overspending and inability to manage their \$34 million annual budget.* That’s it, that’s the whole crisis management budget policy. They won’t cannibalize what little reserves they have by *more than 1% per year*, every year until it is a-1-1-1-1 gone except the bare minimum needed to keep their state accreditation. It never occurred to them that 1% minus 1% minus 1% eventually equals... Well, what did you expect?

“KIDS FIRST for a Better Missouri.”

That’s the slogan for the new front organization set up by The Education Roundtable for the Carnage Budget Campaign. (Okay, so “Kids First” doesn’t sing but how

many new versions of “For the Children?” can anyone come up with?) This Children’s Crusade is being billed as “the biggest protest in Missouri’s history” and we’re really impressed with their organizational skills. All they lack is a Mad Monk and a cross to nail someone to. There’s a list of instructions on their new web site MissouriKidsFirst.org on how to get organized for the Republican spanking scheduled for February 16, 2004 from 1-2 p.m. at the state capital. They have a list of approved slogans for protestors to use for their ‘spontaneous’ placards and picket signs so they will ‘look’ homemade. One of the instructions from Kids First is: “Have an organizer in every school building (that’s someone employed on our time, paid with our money) to use as organizers.” Another instruction is to: “Begin brainstorming anecdotes and stories of how budget cuts will hurt your school district and more importantly how the cuts will affect the students in your district. Be prepared to share these stories in your community and with your local media.” Notice that brainstormed anecdotes and stories do not need to be fact based. In fact, non-factual anecdotes are preferable to real data such as mediocre test scores and rising dropout rates, things they continue to produce despite quantum increases in taxes, budgets and six-figure executive salaries.

This isn’t illegal or unethical – sort of. Being just a little bit squeamish about the fact they are organizing what are supposed to be non-partisan school districts to do some very partisan lobbying, the Missouri Education Roundtable include this interesting cautionary note: ([comments ours](#))

“Planning your transportation. Many districts may be planning on using school buses or school vehicles to transport employees, parents and others to this rally. Because this event will draw media attention, we encourage school districts to carefully consider how school funds or school equipment are used. The rally’s purpose is to raise awareness and educate legislators as well as the public of school needs, not to draw criticism for use of school district resources. ([Fleets of big yellow busses would draw some fire.](#)) School districts may legally use public funds to lobby or inform legislators about school district needs. The only restriction on the use of public funds for these purposes appears in RSMo 115.646.

“Currently, there is no statewide ballot issue involving school funding. ([But if this doesn’t work there soon will be; Plan B is an increase in the state sales tax.](#)) Therefore, the expenditure of public funds to transport employees and others to the Capitol for the rally is not prohibited by law. However, school districts should seriously consider the public relations implications of traveling to the capitol using district funds. ([Here’s our personal favorite.](#)) Legislators, already sensitive to how schools spend money, could easily criticize how much money the district “wasted” traveling to Jefferson City. ([You think?](#)) The Education Roundtable encourages districts to find alternative forms of transportation or alternative funding for the transportation to the Capitol. For example, all

attendees could pay a fee sufficient to cover the transportation cost, or another organization, such as the PTA or the local education association, could cover the transportation cost. (Sure, just put children on the street to sell cards, candy and junk to get the lobbying money. Question: If people who put women on the street to earn money for them are called "pimps," what do you call people who send children to the streets to earn money for them?)

"To complicate the issue further, some districts have board policies that prohibit external groups from renting or using district transportation. We encourage school district administrators to review their school district policies to ensure that the district does not "rent" a school bus to an organization in violation of district policy or practice." (Rats! Wouldn't you know some school boards would have policies that interfere with this unethical behavior?)

The "Kids First" Roundtable goes on to give instructions for "Teachers, administrators and board members of your local parent-teacher association [to] meet in the coming weeks and coordinate efforts to help make your district participation a success." This is to be done with local rallies and by feeding "anecdotes and stories" to the local media to help whip up angry but fiscally ignorant crowds for the rally. We wonder how many placard waving teachers and parents would get on the busses if they knew

our district has \$40 million to educate fewer than 4000 students.

Our "organizers in every school building" must already be hard at work. Before Christmas "SAVE OUR SCHOOL" flyers appeared taped to school lockers. "SAVE OUR SCHOOLS" the flyers shouted in huge 80 pt type. "Write to our state representatives about budget cuts" they said and supplied the names and addresses of Senator Steelman and Representative May. The flyers didn't say who paid for this propaganda. Most likely it was the "building organizers" we thought were paid to work for us.

One of the facts to be carefully avoided in this campaign was illustrated in the AP article that appeared in the local paper December 28, 2003. A policy specialist with the National Conference of State Legislatures' National Center on Educational Finance explained what many of us figured out long ago, that there is *proof of any correlation between spending and learning*. There is however, a strong correlation between the Education Roundtable and political suicide.

Should we use the addresses on that "SAVE OUR SCHOOLS" flyer they plastered all over the schools to warn our legislators? Nah, let's just sit back and watch the Carnage Rally and see who winds up tied to the stake and who winds up holding the matches.

- **The Missouri Education Roundtable** consists of the following organizations: Missouri School Boards Association (MSBA), Missouri Association of School Administrators (MASA), Missouri National Education Association (NEA), Missouri State Teachers Association (MSTA), Missouri Association of Elementary School Principals, Missouri Association of Secondary School Principals, Missouri Congress of Parents and Teachers (PTA) and the Missouri Federation of Teachers and School-Related Personnel. You can visit their *MissouriKidsFirst.org* web site for updates for the President's Day rally.

Next Issue: "Blow off Education" week and "The Pizza Hut Hypocrisy"

To receive " No Standing News " by e-mail, free of charge, send a message to rwnash@rollanet.org with the word SUBSCRIBE in the Subject line.

To unsubscribe send a message to rwnash@rollanet.org with the word UNSUBSCRIBE in the Subject line.

Editors note: Copies of No Standing News can be obtained free from the Rolla Public Library. Also visit our web site at: <http://www.nostandingnews.com>

I encourage distribution of " No Standing News ." Please feel free to copy and distribute any issue.