

No Standing News

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

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A LOT OF SCHOOL BOARD NEWS THAT DIDN'T MAKE THE NEWS

Candid Camera. You didn't read anything at all about the September 19th school board meeting in the newspaper. Hohenfeldt was there taking notes but there was no report in the paper and this is probably the reason why. Steve Leonard, owner/manager of Ch. 16 offered to broadcast their meetings the same way they live broadcast Rolla city council meetings. He offered the school board this public service at no cost and even threw in some free airtime the school board could use to feature school events. Leonard reminded them that by their own admission they have done little to meet their goal to better communicate with the public (he forgot that they do communicate with us when they want money) and this is one way they could do it. They really hate it when the public springs something on them that they have to figure out for themselves. Board President Annie Bass brushed him off and said they didn't have time to discuss it until October. What's to think about? There are no excuses for not cooperating with Channel 16. If the city televises their meetings why can't the school board do it? Steve Leonard is asking for their cooperation so he can wire the room for better quality transmission but he doesn't need their permission to tape their meetings and broadcast them later. The Sunshine Law allows the public, you, me or Channel 16, to tape their meetings whether they like it or not.

If they refuse to be viewed outside the boardroom where the background noise and mumbled conversations make it hard to hear the conduct of school business what conclusion can we draw from their refusal? Shall we assume that they don't want the public to see their board meetings because people will: a. see that the agenda is full of irrelevant make-work, b. see that board members are just rubberstamps for administration, c. see that most things of any importance have been pre-decided probably in illegal chats on the phone, e-mail or in their perpetual closed meetings (no other public body needs a closed meeting *every time* they meet, isn't it strange that the school board always has one?). Maybe they don't want us watch the details of the next "It's Worth It" tax campaign. The promised October discussion of Leonard's offer has now been put off to some other unspecified time – until after the April election?

Another Strassner complaint against Ch. 16. We think it was very gracious of Steve Leonard to make the offer to televise their meetings because to do it he has to deal with Annie Bass, Dana Rapier and Keith Strassner. The old "It's Worth It" committee, (add city council member Charlotte Wiggins) have been trying for the last 18 months to run him out of business and they're still at it. Just before Steve Leonard appeared before these hostile people to make his offer, board member Keith Strassner had run over to city hall to file another complaint number three or four against Channel 16! During the '01 levy campaign Bass and Wiggins had backed out of a Ch. 16 televised debate and made a lot of silly accusations they couldn't prove. Strassner, Bass and Wiggins complained to the FCC and the city because Leonard wouldn't join their Spin Room. The FCC didn't bother to reply and the city should have done the same. The city council finds it easy to ignore most other complaints but with council member Charlotte Wiggins egging them on behind the scenes, they had real live hearings (something they should have for their rate increases) and they let the very special Mr. Strassner sit with them to play at being a prosecutor. The thing fizzled out when some council members finally figured out they were being used to grind the Bass-o-matic machine's axe. It's not clear whether they finally caught on that dictating and/or censoring Channel 16's content was messing in First Amendment dynamite or they realized that Strassner was just a mouthpiece for the girls witch-hunt..

Strassner's next complaint to Dan Murphy was that when he bought a copy of a Ch 16 broadcast they didn't charge sales tax. Ah ha! The city and state were being cheated out of taxes. Murphy informed Strassner that the law doesn't require them to charge sales tax; something Keith should have looked up before he made a fool of himself.

On September 12, the same day Leonard offered to broadcast their meetings and give them free advertising time, Strassner had the gall to file another complaint with the city council! This time we don't care what he's complaining about; three strikes and you're out Keith boy. This is now just spiteful harassment. Annie Bass,

Charlotte Wiggins and Dana Rapier are still trying to silence the only media they don't control (besides us) before next April's school tax-and-spend vote. Why don't they quit hiding behind Keith's tasseled loafers and do their own knife work? It's time for the council to send this gang packing. Is the city trying to keep downtown merchants or run them off?

The '02 MAP test results – a lesson in lies and statistics. Early in September the state released the 2002 MAPP test scores. Local school boards all over the state immediately announced the good or bad results and the media carried the stories – everywhere that is except here in Perfectville at our Blue Ribbon Gold Star State Accredited "everybody-wants-to-be-like-us" school district. Since you are unlikely to get these scores from the school district the link to the DESE site is: <http://www.dese.state.mo.us/schooldata/four/081096/map3none.html>>

Notice in the chart how DESE has manipulated the results so poor performing schools could be made to look not-quite-so-poor when they quote the numbers in press releases to taxpayers who will never see the full report. In each grade taking the math test they added together only the top two "good" scores, i.e. "Proficient or Advanced" and gave the total of those who can do work expected of or exceeding their age and grade. The "bad" scores, euphemistically named "Step 1" and "Progressing" (roughly the equivalent to grades of D's and F's) are added together. But wait, didn't they leave out something? Yes, the fifth scoring group in the middle or those only "Nearing Proficient." "Nearing Proficient" means: *"Students understand many key concepts, although their application of that knowledge is limited.* In other words, they sorta-kinda get some of it but can't use it for anything.

We have added back in the conveniently missing fifth group, the "Nearing Proficient" with the "Step 1 and Progressing" group to see how many students really don't get it. This is how it came out: in **4th grade math**, **66.3%** of students are less than proficient, in **8th grade math**, **78.4%** are less than proficient and in **10th grade math** a **whopping 83%** of all students only made it to a less than proficient level!

A few of the Rolla scores were up fractionally from last year but overall they are still deplorable. Compared to the scores of the previous four years we aren't making any progress. Compared to the average state scores we barely match the state average and who wants to be just average in a below average state? Is that all a Blue Ribbon Gold Star State Accredited "everybody-wants-to-be-like-us" school district can do

– be average? Another secret the school board is hiding is the SAT scores have also dropped. What does it say about the meaning of our much touted "Blue Ribbon" that so many students can't do work at their grade level? What does it tell us about our teachers? What does it say about our school board, the Superintendent and the new Curriculum Director that they have had two board meetings since the results were available but haven't even admitted they have the results?

Apparently aromatherapy, kiwi fruit and back rubs on test day didn't do the trick. Maybe it's time to try just *teaching*?

Yes, "Let's Talk". We were not surprised to see the school board's "Let's Talk" newsletter has been resurrected. The "Let's Talk" newsletter should be called "Let's Doubletalk" because you have to read it twice to see not what it says, but what it carefully doesn't say. "Let's Talk" publications always appear a few months before you feel their hand groping in your pocket. This one threatened to *"negate the teacher and staff pay raises that were voted on in April of 2001"* if we don't vote to "retain" the 69¢ temporary operating levy from 1987 that is due to expire in 2006. This is one of the choices the board says *we will force them to consider* if we don't "care about the children" enough to vote to extend forever what was promised to be a temporary levy for only 18 years to fix up some buildings. Cutting costs or belt-tightening is never one of the choices to show how much *they* care about the children. Do you ever get tired of being threatened by our own school board? We do and we wonder if the teachers and staff ever get tired of being used as a threat against voters?

Some people will say that the board can't "negate" those raises because the only reason they voted for the 80¢ levy was to give teachers a raise. Those naive people need a remedial class in reading ballot language. The ballot language only said: *"For the purpose of attracting and retaining staff shall the board of education raise...."* our taxes by 80¢. Do you see anything there that promises any raises on a permanent basis? Notice that it said, "staff" not just "teachers" that was to keep the door open for those big fat raises they gave the administrators. If they had only given the teachers a \$5 raise they technically would have kept their promise. Their 'promise' just didn't happen to be the same 'promise' voters thought they were making. The board left themselves that loophole when they cautiously crafted the ballot wording. The next time you get an issue of "Let's Doubletalk" better read it very, very carefully.

The State Audit. The much dreaded audit has come and gone but the school board just can't stop crowing about their "clean" audit and bashing the petitioners for the \$16,500 cost. The city did the same thing after their petition audit in 1999 and their "ha-ha-you-didn't-get-us" gloating has come back many times to haunt them. In another example of good sportsmanship the Jr. Hi has replaced their phone music with a recorded official gloat and petitioner bashing statement for people to listen to while they're on hold. They apparently didn't realize that some of the people who would have to listen to it are some of the 1,300 petitioners. Superintendent Adams either doesn't check on what his staff is doing or he can't control their worst impulses. Our observations on the audit are these.

- There is nothing for the board to gloat about in the state audit and only fools would not see the petition audit itself as a danger sign. The fact that district taxpayers felt they needed to go to such lengths to get accountability from the school board and administration says volumes about the disconnect between what the board does and what people want them to do. The "huge" \$16,500 cost they whine about is less than they spent this year on grass seed and landscaping for the soccer field and less than the cost of their aborted Superintendent search with the Bickert Group.

The audit was worth doing even though the auditors obviously didn't break a sweat digging deeply into district operations. The school board's very poor public relations concerning the audit, from their initial outrage and accusations to the behavior of their loyal jeering squad at the audit presentation has been consistently childish and immature. This tells us more about the character of the people we have on the school board than the audit revealed about their careless management.

- The board and the outgoing Superintendents Ewing and Westbrook were vastly relieved at what the audit *did not* contain. An interesting reaction. What were they afraid it would say? The petitioners never once said or implied they suspected fraud or embezzlement, that canard was invented by Ewing, Bass and Rapier and repeated ad nauseum in every interview. Amy Wilson (now a non-certified teacher) repeated the accusation at every opportunity and she was able to create lots of opportunities.
- On the night of the audit presentation I saw R.D. Hohenfeldt interviewing three of the

petition organizers but those interviews were never printed. Why not? What did they have to say about the audit that the biased newspaper didn't want to report? Throughout the whole process the board and administrators have used the newspaper like a public relations committee of the board but the petitioners have rarely been quoted and never asked to respond to accusations. The petitioners, as a matter of fact, were pleased with what the audit did contain although there were many areas the auditors themselves admitted they didn't bother to investigate. Why then did the newspaper deliberately spike their interviews?

- The first, and in our opinion the most long reaching benefit of the audit happened when it was announced last spring that the petition was complete and the audit would take place. Upon hearing that unwelcome news Ewing, who had just negotiated the biggest fattest three-year contract in the district's history, instantly resigned and Westbrook followed a few months later. The departure of two men whose arrogance and mismanagement had become insufferable was a plus for the district. Leadership does not come from parroting a cookbook written by a self-styled expert with no credentials. Under Ewing's so-called leadership borrowed from the Carver dogma the board was (quite willingly) led down the yellow brick road where they played at being CEO's and a corporate board like children playing house. The board was easily diverted with "ends and means" rituals and other make-work to keep their noses out of real education and management issues, serious issues they have yet to address. Their addiction to spending instead of managing money is an Ewing habit the board hasn't kicked and judging from their latest plans for more debt for the taxpayers to choke down it doesn't look like they ever will.
- Two of the audit findings, that the board has concealed the annual budget from the public and hasn't bid out their professional contracts, are both significant accountability failures. Their claim that they have had a "clean audit" – a fiction that even Arthur Anderson Co. didn't try to sell – is simply foolish and reveals their ignorance of both the purpose of an audit and the terminology. Their "good ole boy" practice of hiring the same architects, lawyers, auditor's and financial advisors over and over is not only

a violation of the law it has resulted in stale products from professionals who know they don't have to compete or improve their service. After getting what they claim is a "clean audit" they felt safe enough to extend for another three years the contract of Evers and Co, the tame private auditor whose sloppy and inadequate audit work triggered this whole thing. If this audit had been a MAP exam the board would test out at Step 1: *students are substantially behind in terms of meeting Show-Me standards. They demonstrate only a minimal understanding of fundamental concepts and have little or no ability to apply that knowledge.*

The board has shown a remarkable lack of concern for a number of looming crises that will either improve or destroy the system of public education. Instead of playing corporate ego games as they have for the last decade the board should have been discussing the impact of the growing homeschool and parochial school movement in the district, they should have been downsizing administrative fat instead of adding to it, they should have been addressing their antiquated

health benefit program, examining the inequities in their disciplinary policies and reordering budget priorities. In the next five years state funding for education will be cut, perhaps severely, and they are totally unprepared to cope with reduced state support. Wiser school boards have already started cutting fat and putting away cash as a cushion against the worst the state can do. Our grasshoppers, however, are planning for more debt and a bigger, more expensive overhead.

"Can you repeal a petition audit?" Actually asked by a woman (we hope she wasn't a teacher) at the school audit meeting. This must be a hangover from Barbara Bryant and Any Wilson's novel idea last year for an anti-petition petition. For the questioner and all the other constitutionally challenged people out there the answer is: No dear, you can't and did you sleep through all your civics classes or just the ones on the First Amendment?

URL to MAP scores:
<<http://www.dese.state.mo.us/planning/profile/081096.html>>

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