

OPINION

DAILY JOURNAL

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"The Daily Journal is dedicated to community service, to defense of individual rights and to providing those checks upon government which no constitution can ensure."

SCOTT ALEXANDER
founding editor, 1963

AT ISSUE

Public school districts have released state-mandated performance reports.

OUR POINT

The reports offer a wealth of information for the public, but the context of individual district needs and goals must be accounted for.

School reports should be analyzed in context

The Daily Journal

It's report card time for the state's public school districts.

Every year, the Indiana Department of Education requires the districts to issue assessments, called annual performance reports. These include a variety of statistical information about the districts and their respective schools. In addition, average state figures for each section are included.

The districts in Johnson County published their reports on Monday. They were distributed based on ZIP codes. That means subscribers received only the report for the school district that covers that area.

All state districts' reports are available online, though, through the education department's Web site.

The state specifies what kind of information must be presented. In addition, it supplies the districts with certain information. The data provided to school corporations by the department for use in the report cannot be altered. School corporations are encouraged, however, to add supplementary information that provides a more complete picture of schools.

It is in this supplementary material that the individual character of the school districts emerge, and it points to one of the cautions in examining the data.

While the reports offer a wealth of information, readers must take into account the context of the individual districts. In particular, attention should be paid to the unique factors at work in a district, the district's needs and its goals.

Just as Edinburg is not Greenwood, and Franklin is not Center Grove, so should their reports not be held up against each other strictly on the basis of numbers. The unique mission of each school district must be included.

Edinburg's report is almost a sales brochure for its district, highlighting the top 10 reasons why its schools "are right for your child." The reasons include plenty of opportunity for participation in athletics and other extracurricular activities and the town's location, near enough to Indianapolis to make culture accessible but far enough that it hasn't lost its small-town feel.

No. 1 is full-day kindergarten. Edinburg is the only district in the county that offers a full-day program to all kindergarten students.

The reports from Center Grove and Nineveh-Hensley-Jackson look almost like yearbook spreads, showing students doing things in and out of class.

In the Franklin report, there is a lengthy discussion of the district's goals, highlighting the ones that have been accomplished. Some of the goals are short term, but others will take years to accomplish.

The statistics themselves are wide-ranging. There are ISTEP performance figures for this school year and the previous three for the district and for individual schools.

There also are categories for class sizes, unexcused absences, suspensions and expulsions. By showing three years' worth of figures, readers can quickly see that some figures are aberrations.

For example, in one district, one of the schools showed a sudden increase in the number of students with a high number of unexcused days. But a quick check of the other schools shows no similar spike. So the jump, while a concern to school officials, does not represent a broader pattern. Similarly, a high graduation rate shown over a three-year period is particular cause for celebration.

The reports are valuable. They offer a unique view into the lives of the school districts and their schools.

But they are only a tool. And like any tool, they can be used and abused.

Read them carefully. Then apply the conclusions within the context of the local situation.

Focus: Passports

Will problems outweigh benefits of new law?

Scripps Howard News Service

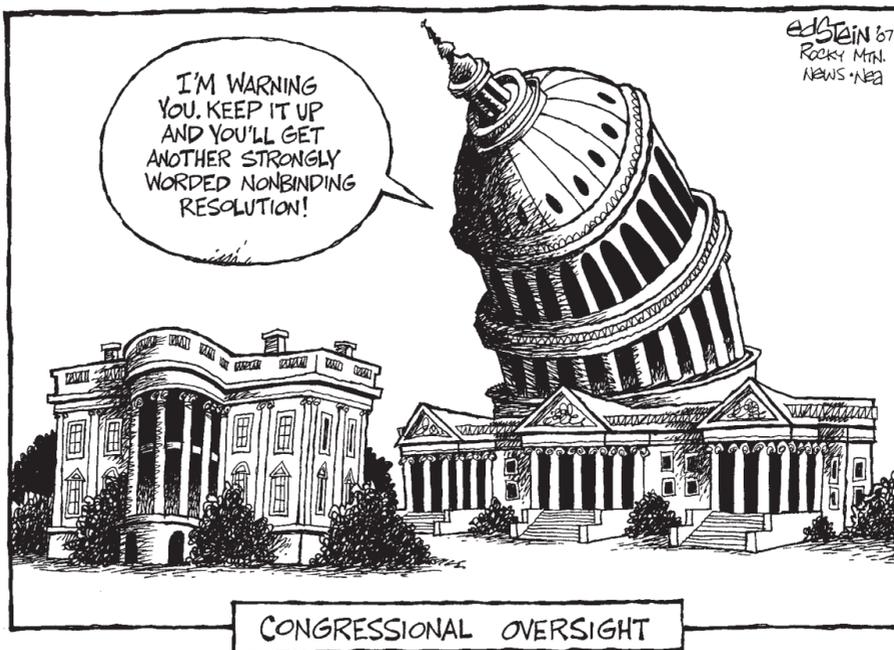
Incontestably, requiring passports of air travelers coming from our closest neighbors — Canada, Mexico, Bermuda, the Caribbean — is a step backward for easy and convenient travel for tourists and business travelers.

Previously, a government-issued photo ID, typically a driver's license, was sufficient, but the passport requirement was added as part of a 2004 antiterrorism law.

Americans needing a passport should be prepared to pay (\$97 for a new one) and wait (about six weeks) unless they're prepared to pay \$60 extra for expedited service, although there have been press accounts of delays in getting expedited service.

Next year, travelers coming into the United States by car and cruise ship will need passports to enter. Only about 27 percent of Americans have valid passports, which means the great majority of them will be unable to make a spur-of-the-moment trip to Canada or Mexico, which worries tourism officials in both those countries.

The passport requirement should be reviewed at some point to see if it really is a terrorist deterrent. While travel in Europe has become more and more document-free, the New World has more than taken up the slack in cross-border paperwork.



This science class is brought to you by Dow Chemical

I'd like to thank all of you teachers for attending today. We in the legislature are conducting these meetings in schools around the state to explain some new plans we have for education here in Indiana. We lawmakers are excited, and we think you will be, too.

As people who work with young minds, you must be aware that different people have different talents. We agree.

For example, we in the Statehouse feel we are pretty good at mandating expensive programs for schools.

On the other hand, we don't feel it's our strong suit to actually pass tax increases to pay for all of our great ideas.

Oh, well. You go with your strengths, right?

Anyway, we put our heads together to come up with some creative methods for raising the needed revenue.

Tried to think outside the box, you might say.

What did we find outside that box? Branding.

Branding is the way of the educational future. It works for sports arenas, for symphony halls, for concert venues, for public and semi-public events of all kinds.

These days, if an event draws a crowd, someone has paid for the right to slap a corporate logo somewhere in its vicinity. We thought: Why not use the same proven — and politically safe — techniques for schools?

So, teachers, take off those Clark-Pleasant Middle School nametags, and put on your new Verizon Wireless Middle School badges.



Norman Knight

What's that? Yes, we did make a deal with them after the music venue closed.

We have some other great ideas to help your school help pay its own way.

And you teachers will be key players in the new plan. Mr. Knight, for example, instead of teaching in boring old Room 625 in the G Hall, will now welcome his students into the Mead Notebook Language Arts Class at the end of Prentice Hall.

Inside your classrooms, you'll notice the tops of student desks have commercial messages printed on them.

Companies from Apple to Net Zero will be a constant presence during our students' studies. As students sleep in the back of the room, they will be resting their heads on corporate America.

You'll be happy to know that we have secured sponsors for each academic department. The history and social studies departments will now be brought to you by British Petroleum and Halliburton.

Math classes are funded by Chase Financial Services and science classes by Dow Chemical.

And we haven't forgotten the related school subjects. Family and consumer science classes will

be funded by Wal-Mart, while physical education class will be sponsored by Hostess Twinkies. An executive decision has been made to eliminate art and music classes from schools.

There's no real money in it, and we don't test that stuff on ISTEP anyway.

As for other areas of the school, we've made a great, long-term deal to privatize the cafeteria. For the next 75 years, Coca-Cola and McDonald's have agreed to take over all food services in the corporation.

They will be providing the delicious and nutritious meals your students will be purchasing every day.

Oh, yes. Teachers, we also would like for you to wear these Nike ball caps and warm-up jackets while you teach. What's that?

Yes, we have tinkered with the dress code a bit.

We legislators of both parties feel branding is the future of education.

Buying and selling is the American way of life. Schools are educating workers who will also be consumers, and consumers are what keep our economy strong. We want enthusiastic shoppers; shoppers who grow up knowing and loving the corporations that do so much for us. Isn't that what we call progress?

Teachers, we in the legislature are excited about the new school-funding plan.

How about you?

Norman Knight, a teacher at Clark-Pleasant Middle School, writes this weekly column for the Daily Journal. Send comments to letters@thejournalnet.com.

Congress, president facing difficult questions as war quagmire deepens

The dilemma is such that, when facing it, one is left with a tremendous feeling of impotence. How can this nation extricate itself from what increasingly is becoming a sequel to Vietnam, the most divisive affair in the 20th century?

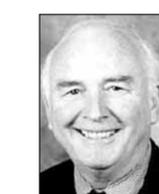
What is the best way to end a misguided adventure that once again threatens to tear the political and social fabric to such an extent that it will take years to repair?

President Bush believes the only way of salvaging at least some of the goals sought by the invasion of Iraq is to add another 21,500 troops to quell the secular violence paralyzing Baghdad. Nothing, it seems, will dissuade the commander in chief from his belief that this "surge" is the necessary ingredient for success and ultimate withdrawal of the U.S. presence from what now is openly a civil war.

Democrats and a growing number of Republicans in Congress see it otherwise, and the upshot is likely to be adoption this week of a nonbinding resolution opposing the move. This could be followed before year's end with withholding of funds to support the war, an action that even the most ardent Bush critics would like to defer, given its potential impact on American troops in the field. No one wants to be accused of not supporting the young men and women charged with trying to bring some order out of the chaos.

The additional troops will be sent, of course, no matter what measure Congress adopts nor how many protesters led by Hollywood stars demonstrate here. The commander in chief is, as Bush reminded us recently, just that and he will make the decision.

What impact then will a divided American government have on the chances of success for the president's plan? Will the



Dan K. Thomasson

religious factions and insurgents in Iraq renew their efforts, believing that Americans ultimately will force the nation's premature withdrawal? Certainly that was what happened in Vietnam. More critical is what that message might mean to the safety of U.S. forces already there and on their way.

These are questions being asked, and with justification, by those who counsel that bad things can come from ill-advised congressional interference, that more American lives will be lost and that even more instability than already exists will result. They echo the president's plea to the Congress and the American people to give this latest approach a chance.

Yet there are among the dissenters a number of distinguished lawmakers, not the least of which is Virginia's John Warner, who is the former chairman of the Armed Services Committee and now its ranking Republican. Warner's need to speak out against the surge is intensified by his admitted failure to do so during the Vietnam era, when constant increases in troops were demanded but failed to win the conflict.

The parallels between then and now are obvious, except that even before the invasion of Iraq seasoned generals were arguing to no avail that as many as 300,000 troops would be needed to keep

the peace. It is, of course, too late for that, even though it is clear how right they were.

Those opposing more troops now see the plan as a futile attempt that will fail at the cost of far more American lives. They argue that placing even more U.S. troops in harm's way among un dependable Iraqi forces infiltrated by members of the factions they are trying to subdue is foolish and as ill conceived as the conduct of the war has been from its beginning, when the Pentagon's blitzkrieg success was not bolstered by any viable postwar consideration or planning by the Bush administration.

There are strong points on both sides of this debate. U.S. troops, if reporting is accurate, already are beginning to feel like those who served in Vietnam, unsupported and unappreciated. Not to provide them with the extra strength needed to accomplish the mission would add to that dangerous psychology.

Many have lost buddies and relatives, and to think that was for nothing could be devastating to morale. On the other hand, it is legitimate to ask when, if ever, the current Iraqi forces and their government can carry their own water?

And how many more U.S. lives we must lose to find out?

The polls and election results make it clear Americans want this over now, but at what cost?

We pay lawmakers to worry about our wishes. The president necessarily must think independently and not about polls.

Therein lies the dilemma, and it can be paralyzing.

Dan K. Thomasson, a Hoosier native and Franklin College trustee, is former editor of the Scripps Howard News Service. Send comments to letters@thejournalnet.com.

YOUR VIEWS

Superintendent's column on full-day 'K' on the mark

To the editor:

Right on, Superintendent William Patterson. I wholeheartedly agree with your column "Benefits of full-day kindergarten aren't proved" (Daily Journal, Jan. 25). All the research I, too, have been hearing/reading supports what you concluded.

Kindergarten is important, but not all day because some pupils at that age are not ready for a full day of school instruction.

I would rather see money expended to have a higher retention rate of students. Not all students can learn in the typical traditional schoolroom atmosphere but have to receive their instruction that's geared for the "right-brained" students.

I'm happy that Franklin is investigating and implementing a number of programs to support student success for all students from pre-kindergarten through Grade 12. Thank you.

Betty Chastain
Franklin

Connector threat to privately owned land

To the editor:

I am very concerned that Gov. Mitch Daniels is pushing this proposed Indiana Commerce Connector legislation through extremely fast, perhaps in days or weeks.

Since the rest of the state may benefit from selling out our counties, I am wondering what the five affected counties, including Johnson, can do to stop this.

If you look at the Indiana Department of Transportation chart handed out at the recent meeting at Franklin College, it looks like a long, thoughtful process is planned. However, if the P3 Authority in Step 2 is passed by the legislature, the governor will have the authority to continue with the whole plan.

The state should never be able to take our hard-earned land for someone else to make a profit from it; that is exactly what Daniels' proposed Indiana Commerce Connector will allow.

Carolyn Fulkerson
Franklin

Consider danger before making winter trips

To the editor:

In regard to Yu-long Ling's column Jan. 19, I wanted to say that at our retirement home we discussed the deaths of the three Mount Hood climbers, as follows:

What were they doing up there in winter? No matter how well prepared they were, the weather was too cold for adventuring in such a dangerous place. The same is true for the family in Merlin, Ore. They should not have tried that trip in winter.

Professor Ling had a good, though sad, set of topics for his class to discuss. In these two cases, public safety is more important than individual liberty, we decided, because the rescuers were placed in too great a danger. Luckily, the rescuers survived their ordeals.

Carolyn Hood
Franklin

Indiana's most needy bear brunt of taxes

To the editor:

How can California residents move to Indiana and the Greenwood area, purchase new homes costing about \$200,000 or rent expensive apartments, and then qualify for food stamps, free school lunches (so I have been told) at Clark-Pleasant schools and receive welfare?

Something is wrong. When this was brought to the attention of Rep. Woody Burton's office, the answer was that it was a federal government problem, not ours.

Something is wrong. Maybe the answer is for the mayors of Greenwood and Franklin to get more companies to settle in their cities and give 10-year tax abatements that won't help anyone, then raise personal property taxes, which will especially hurt the elderly who are on a fixed income, welfare, receiving Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps and heating and electric bill assistance.

Are these the folks who should pay for your parks and trails with higher taxes?

Something is wrong.
John N. Trisler
Greenwood

WRITE A LETTER

The Daily Journal invites readers to submit letters, opinion columns and e-mail comments for the opinion page.

SEND IT

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letters@thejournalnet.com

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