



Carmage Walls
Commentary Prize

2018 Entry Form

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Please give a brief explanation of issues discussed and the results achieved. (This space will expand as you type in your comments.)

The editorials argue for policies that ensure Oklahoma's K-12 education system serves students with the greatest needs, and advocates against actions that appear designed to harm those same student groups – including children with special needs, homeless students and racial minorities.

by **The Oklahoman Editorial Board** Published: September 11, 2017

THE success of Oklahoma's Lindsey Nicole Henry Scholarship Program proves that when customers have power, providers are more responsive and service improves. This is breaking news only in government.

The Lindsey Nicole Henry Scholarship Program provides state funds to children with special needs to attend private schools. Since its creation in 2010, the program has been wildly successful. Last year, the program provided scholarships to 528 students. Participants credit the program with changing children's lives for the better.

The scholarship program led to creation in Oklahoma City of the Good Shepherd Catholic School at Mercy, which is designed specifically to serve children with autism. Good Shepherd Catholic School has since opened three new classrooms outside of the school's central location on the Mercy Hospital campus and 71 percent of its students are Lindsey Nicole Henry scholarship recipients.

"The growth of Lindsey Nicole Henry has absolutely helped us grow," Pat Filer, director of Good Shepherd school, recently told The Oklahoman's Ben Felder. "There are families who wouldn't be here if not for that."

The program's success can be seen in the weakness of the arguments offered by its critics, such as Andrea Kunkel, general counsel for Cooperative Council for Oklahoma School Administration. Kunkel argues that not all private schools may properly serve children with special needs.

"Nobody has any idea how those schools are actually serving those students since the same standards that apply to public schools don't apply to private schools," Kunkel said.

That argument is nonsense. Contrary to her claim, there are people who absolutely know if students are being well served: the child's parents. Under this scholarship program, parents have the power to choose a school, and they do so based on what they believe will be best for that child. Should a private school not live up to a parent's expectations, they can withdraw a child from that school and transfer the student to another school. They can even return a child to the traditional public school system.

The continued growth of the scholarship program and schools serving special-needs students proves most parents are very pleased with the results.

Kunkel also notes federal law imposes requirements on public schools and that "there are mechanisms that parents can and do use to correct" situations when they feel a child is not properly served in a public school.

So on the one hand, critics of the scholarship program argue parents aren't capable of figuring out if their child is properly served in a private school, but then argue those same parents are fully capable of navigating federal, state and local bureaucracies to obtain an improvement in services not being rendered in a public school. If you can do the latter, then obviously you can do the former.

And the fact that public schools now face the potential loss of students and associated funding increases parents' leverage when dealing with those bureaucracies. So the

Lindsey Nicole Henry Scholarship Program benefits not only scholarship recipients, but also eligible children who ultimately remain in the public school system.

The lesson: Empowering consumers generates improved service every time. So why not expand this scholarship model to all student populations?

by **The Oklahoman Editorial Board** Published: September 26, 2017

WE have written before about flaws in the overhaul of Oklahoma's A-F grading system for public schools, particularly its use of lower academic expectations for middle-class minority students than what will be expected of comparable white students.

An eight-year plan submitted to the federal government last week by the Oklahoma Department of Education, required by the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, highlights how those racially disturbing A-F revisions will impact school evaluations.

Under the new school grading system, students of all races who are poor or have learning disabilities won't be expected to score as high on state tests as other students. That's understandable.

But the system also imposes lower expectations for students who are not poor and don't have learning disabilities *based solely on race*. An agency simulation showed the goals for middle-class black, Hispanic and Native American students would be lower than the goals for middle-class white students. The simulation even indicated academic targets for middle-class black students would be almost identical to the target for students with disabilities.

Thus, there can be dramatically different academic expectations for two children from intact, middle-class families sitting in the same classroom based solely on their skin color.

Oklahoma's ESSA plan explains that under one potential A-F school grading measurement, "Schools will receive additional credit for students exceeding their target by achieving the next highest proficiency level ..." Or another system may be used in which, if students "on average, exceed" the targets for their racial or socioeconomic groups, the school "will receive the highest scores" on that component of its state report card.

Given that the targets for minority students will be set unnaturally low, schools could "exceed" those targets even if minority students still have far lower test scores than their white peers. Minority children could be left behind other students from comparable backgrounds, and schools would still be rewarded with a higher A-F grade.

The state's plan says schools failing to test the vast majority of students will have their A-F grade slightly lowered, so a school that would otherwise get a C grade will instead get a C-minus. As an example, the ESSA plan says a school testing just 64 percent of American Indian students would have the "minus" added to its school grade.

But when schools fail to test large segments of the student population, officials are typically trying to inflate test scores by testing only the school's best students. That in turn can bump a school's grade from a D to a C. If D or F schools are able to achieve a C-minus grade through such tactics, that's not much of a deterrent.

Those who doubt such things would occur should note another statement in the ESSA plan (which refers to school districts as "local educational agencies," or LEAs): "The state's decision not to give end-of-course math assessments has resulted in some LEAs

discouraging students from taking advanced mathematics coursework in middle school in order to improve assessment scores in high school.”

Oklahoma's A-F system should encourage school improvement that benefits students of all races and backgrounds, not allow poor-performing schools to mask their flaws.

by **The Oklahoman Editorial Board** Published: January 19, 2018

THOSE willing to abuse power and mistreat people in one situation will do the same in different settings. This is as true in government as in private life, and the Bixby school district may be the latest example.

Bixby is embroiled in controversy after a student said he was sexually assaulted with a pool cue at the home of former Superintendent Kyle Wood during a function for football players.

Several school officials are now being investigated to determine if they tried to thwart a police investigation by failing to report the assault as soon as they became aware of the allegations. Immediate reporting is required by law. (Wood has since been let go by the district — with a six-figure payout.)

In a recent affidavit, the district attorney's office in Rogers County highlights several facts suggesting Bixby school officials aren't being forthright and may be trying to hinder the investigation.

The assault is believed to have occurred Sept. 27, and school officials were reportedly informed Oct. 26. But they didn't officially report the allegations to the Department of Human Services until Nov. 10.

The affidavit says some school officials met with a Bixby police officer on Oct. 31 and discussed the issue in a general fashion without filing an official report, and that “those present indicated superintendent Kyle Wood would not allow school officials to report the incident to the police until the morning of November 2, 2017.”

Furthermore, when investigators obtained a warrant for the electronic communications of four school officials for a period of 44 days, “a Bixby school IT employee told investigators he would produce the electronic communications in a searchable format.” Instead, the school gave law enforcement “tens of thousands of emails in an unindexed and minimally searchable format where each electronic communication was an unnamed file that had to be individually opened to be examined.”

Put simply, the affidavit paints a portrait of school officials behaving as if they are above the law. If so, it's not the first time.

In 2010, the Bixby school board, with the backing of Wood, voted not to comply with the Lindsey Nicole Henry Scholarship Program for children with special needs. This created serious financial hardship for several families seeking to place children in schools better designed to serve their unique needs.

Then-state Superintendent Sandy Garrett, a Democrat, said school board members engaged in such intransigence were “in violation of their oaths of office” by refusing to obey the law. The attorney general's office sent a letter to several such school boards, warning “no executive officer has the right to simply ignore the directives contained in such laws.”

In 2016, the state Supreme Court showed Bixby officials didn't have a legal leg to stand on when it unanimously upheld the constitutionality of the scholarship program.

Not long ago, Bixby school officials were willing to flout the law to inconvenience the families of children with special needs. Given their current actions (and inactions), it's reasonable to ask if district officials hold similar attitudes toward victims of sexual assault.

by **The Oklahoman Editorial Board** Published: February 19, 2018

CRITICS often caricature Republicans as greedy and heartless, with little compassion for struggling citizens. The state Senate Education Committee did little to undermine that stereotype when it killed legislation benefiting children who are homeless or suffering from mental illness.

Since 2010, Oklahoma has offered the Lindsey Nicole Henry Scholarship Program to children with special needs, such as autism. The program provides state funds that can be used to pay for a private school designed to meet those students' needs. It's been highly successful and allowed creation of an autism-centric private school.

Senate Bill 981, by Sen. A.J. Griffin, R-Guthrie, would have slightly expanded the program to include any “student who has received a mental health or substance abuse disorder diagnosis from a licensed mental health professional and is enrolling in a school with treatment programming for the diagnosis” and students “classified as homeless” under federal law who are “enrolling in a school with programming specifically designated for homeless students.”

This is a common-sense approach to helping children facing severe circumstances. Yet opponents acted as though the sky was falling. One bit of commentary even equated mentally ill children with left-handed students, as though the needs of the former are indistinguishable from the latter.

Those who doubt homeless children could benefit from the Henry scholarship program need look no further than Positive Tomorrows, an existing private school for homeless children. Along with standard educational services, Positive Tomorrows provides children with clothes, shoes, hygiene products, after-school programs and even individual birthday parties. Counselors are constantly available to work with children.

Positive Tomorrows survives on charitable donations and serves dozens of children. Yet the school's president has said it is “forced to turn away children constantly” because of financial limitations.

Allowing homeless children to receive Henry scholarship funds already designated for the education of those children would not increase state costs. But it would provide enormous benefit to those children.

Schools serving children with mental illness would generate comparable benefit, as would those designed for students with substance abuse problems. The families of many of those children cannot afford treatment without something like the Henry scholarship program.

In short, the benefits of SB 981 are immense; the downside is nonexistent. Yet when the bill came up in committee last week, it was defeated 8-6. Seven of the eight opponents were Republicans.

Notably, Sen. Allison Ikley-Freeman, D-Tulsa, was among the supporters. She recently won a special election in a heavily Republican district. Her Republican opponent was a vocal opponent of school choice programs like SB 981 (unlike the previous district

officeholder, who supported school choice and easily survived re-election challenges). One wonders if Republicans can connect the dots.

According to legend, upon hearing poor people had no bread to eat, Marie Antoinette responded, "Let them eat cake." For Republican senators to embrace this attitude toward the plight of homeless and mentally ill children is fiscally irresponsible and morally offensive.