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READERS FORUM

State on leading edge of early childhood education

By Bob McCormick

Innovative, efficient and resourceful are adjectives used to describe the leading-edge public policies of top states like Wisconsin, Washington, Minnesota, Colorado, Massachusetts — and Oklahoma? Yes, Oklahoma.

Our state has become a national leader in groundbreaking and effective early childhood policy. Education Week recently highlighted our state's policy and positive research studies have been published by Yale and Georgetown universities.

Access to early childhood education for all 4-year-olds is available in only three states: Oklahoma, New Jersey and Georgia. In those states, the results have been dramatic.

Four-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds learn their shapes and colors, numerals, meanings of words and can color with control and print and use scissors. They are better prepared to start school. They can learn more in kindergarten and the early elementary grades. Teachers are able to spend less time getting them up to speed and more time teaching fundamental skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic.

According to an exhaustive study by Georgetown University researchers and the National Institute for Early Childhood Research, the program had strong positive effects in all children, not only those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The results included language skill improvements and improvements in cognitive and motor skills. Hispanic and African-American children improved the most. Hispanic children improved 54 percent, for example. African-American children registered a 28.1 percent improvement. And white children improved their verbal scores by 19 percent.

The research proves that the initiative is closing the opportunity gap for many young Oklahomans.

An early group of private and public sector visionaries formed a non-partisan alliance, saw the potential benefits of the initiative, and promoted it. These visionaries relied on the data instead of ideology.

Now first lady Kim Henry has taken up the early childhood mantle by promoting the Partnership for School Readiness. House Bill 1094 created the program in 2003 and Gov. Brad Henry requested funding for the program in his state of the state speech. He and the first lady

obtained \$2 million in new funding for the partnership from the Legislature in April.

The Partnership for School Readiness is not just another new government program. It is as visionary and innovative as the early childhood program that research has proven effective. The public-private partnership will be housed and run outside of state government at the private, non-profit Institute for Child Advocacy with personnel on loan from the Department of Human Services.

This process has been transformational for many. DHS Director Howard Hendrick, a former state senator, once a skeptic of such programs, has seen the data and become a believer and a leader in making the partnership happen. And already, American Electric Power's Public Service Co. of Oklahoma has provided a large donation.

The partnership seeks four results:

- Teaching families to nurture, teach and provide for their young children;
► Helping children to be born healthy and remain healthy;
► Providing high quality and affordable day-care for children when needed;
► Enabling children to enter school prepared to learn and succeed.

The Citizens' Policy Center supports the effective implementation of the new Partnership for School Readiness and further research into the effectiveness of early childhood education. Research into how to fine tune and adapt the program will be necessary, along with estimates of future costs.

The desired results of the partnership align with the CPC's Cycle of Opportunity, anchoring the important foundation for all Oklahomans that includes a healthy birth, a good education, job and business ownership and wealth accumulation.

We applaud the visionaries who recognized the positive impact early childhood education would have on young Oklahomans. We also encourage Gov. Henry and the first lady in their persistence in making this next innovative step happen.

Bob McCormick is chairman of the board of the Citizens' Policy Center, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization committed to creating better opportunities for all Oklahoma citizens through policy research and education.

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Who's in charge in Fallujah?

The mujahedeen also enforces their own brand of religion

By Naser Kadhem

FALLUJAH, Iraq — Capt. Mohammed al-Issawi, 35, an officer in the Fallujah Protection Army, stood at his checkpoint alongside a squad of his own men and a handful of "mujahedeen" insurgents.

"We work together with the mujahedeen to provide security," he said.

And even if they did not work together, he said, "we would cooperate to give them the news" about U.S. troop movements, foreigners in town, or anything else of concern to the anti-interim government guerrilla movement.

Despite the creation of the government-sponsored Fallujah Protection Army, in this predominantly Sunni town de facto control is exercised by the mujahedeen, dressed in trademark yishmagh shawls and armed with Kalashnikov assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers.

Not only do they stand guard on the street, they also enforce their own brand of religious Puritanism on the town's residents. Posters on the walls of Fallujah homes, shops, mosques and schools warn that anyone caught drinking or even bringing alcohol into town will be "severely punished."

Young people in the city say the mujahedeen insist residents must obey God's decrees since he helped them attain victory in its battle with the Americans.

Omar Muhammed, 24, recalls how the mujahedeen showed they were serious about enforcing their edicts. Soon after the United States ended its siege of the city, the newly empowered mujahedeen forces arrested a group of young men they had caught drinking.

"The next day the mujahedeen drove a white pickup truck through the town, so that people could see how they were arrested, and beat them during the ride," Muhammed said.

The owners of local cafes have fared no better, accused by the insurgents in control of the city of distracting youth from religion.

"The mujahedeen closed my coffee-house 10 days ago," said Salah Sahi, owner of what was once the al-Nour cafe. "I am thinking of changing my trade to selling religious cassettes and CDs."

Meanwhile, the new authorities in the city have targeted women as part of their effort to impose a strict Islamic code.

"Your city urges you to be Muslim in word and deed," said one pamphlet being distributed in the town. It called on them to wear the hijab headscarf and to "put on makeup only for your husbands."



ABDEL KADER / Associated Press

A resident picks through the rubble of a house in Fallujah, Iraq.

"We will have no mercy on those who fight against God with their beauty and their clothes," the pamphlet read.

Local residents report seeing fewer women on the streets, and those who do appear wear the hijab and the face-covering niqab veil, too.

"We don't find too many women going out alone to shop any more," said shop owner Abd al-Jabbar al-Janabi. "They go out now only with their husbands or brothers."

Meanwhile, barbers have been ordered not to cut hair in "foreign" styles.

"They told me not to give the Marines' cut, or shaved heads or goatees or sideburns," said barber Salah Kadhem, 27. "I will comply or I'll have my shop destroyed."

At least one edict ordered by the mujahedeen has been universally welcomed by local residents.

"We thank the mujahedeen, because

they did us a big favor by threatening doctors who took high fees from their patients," said Raed Muhammad, 26, a history student.

"There were some doctors who charged high fees, but now they've reduced them to be equal with the other doctors," said pediatrician Abdal-Sitar Jawad, 46. "It's a positive step."

In fact, many residents are happy to see a strict Islamic code come to their city.

Taxi driver Shami Abd al-Jabar, 32, praised the mujahedeen for "good steps to prevent youth from wandering around at night drinking alcohol. . . Such acts are against our religion and tribal society."

"I feel security and stability, because the mujahedeen protect the Fallujis," Jabar said.

Naser Kadhem is a journalist who writes for the Institute for War & Peace Reporting, Lancaster House, 33 Islington High Street, London N1 9LH, U.K.; Web site: www.iwpr.net.

READERS FORUM

Suicide: Who will save us from ourselves?

By Jerry Griffin

The numbers are so huge they fail to have an impact on us. Suicide is the eighth leading cause of death in the United States, and more alarming, the third major cause of death among young people aged 15-19.

The dispatcher's voice crackled over my police radio. "Adam-4, a woman has called worried about her brother — check on his wellbeing."

My knock on the front door went unanswered. I went into the house and discovered pills, alcohol and a rifle that had recently been fired. A brief search revealed nothing but signs of loneliness and despair.

In the yard, I found a man lying next to a tree. He was breathing but was ashen gray. I knelt besides him

and doing the best I could — comforted him. He died on the way to the hospital — another tragic end to an unfulfilled life. Later I thought about what I had just witnessed, not realizing the impact the experience would have on me.

I wondered — what if he had waited a moment? Would he have been able to get the help he needed to put the events in his life in perspective? While that answer cannot be known it became apparent to me that if a person can wait, if a person can get assistance from friends, family or professional counselors, there is a chance he or she will be able to find reasons to live and, given proper support skills, will find reasons to be joyful again.

The events that at that moment

caused him so much pain would have passed, but pulling the trigger removed all his options — he chose as many others do — an irreversible moment.

In the United States there are 30,000 suicides annually, although the actual number might be closer to 50,000. In the last decade an estimated half million people took their own lives. It is as if the population of Tulsa disappeared. Early this century the annual worldwide death toll from suicide will reach a million and more than 15 million suicide attempts. The numbers are so huge they numb a person's senses.

But the numbers fail to tell the real stories — that thousands upon thousands who find no better choice than to prematurely end their lives and of

people in our community who become hopeless and helpless.

They are the stories like that of the a teenage friend who was articulate, bright and seemingly had everything going for him, who chose death over life and of the pre-teen girl who, because she did not make the cheer-leading team, sought escape in a bottle of pills. Or my friend, Karen, who, after a lifetime of giving to others, chose to give no more.

The numbers also do not tell the stories of the 700,000 people in the United States who, according to the Center for Injury Prevention and Control, will attempt suicide this year. Someone you know and love is already in that number or has a high probability of being in them during your lifetime.

The surgeon general's 1999 blue-

print to prevent suicide in the United States lists suicide as the eighth leading cause of death. The report is a call to action — a call to help those who feel helpless.

It cannot be just the mission of health professionals who work daily helping others. It is an individual and community responsibility. Citizens need to contact an organization that deals with suicide issues and ask what they can do to help.

And as we would help someone in a medical emergency, we should also be willing to help in time of personal crisis.

Dr. Jerry Griffin's book, "Choices: The Irreversible Moment," is to be released in June 2005. He is a criminal justice professor for Kaplan College, and teaches a course on suicide prevention.