

Chalkboard

By

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As you read this article perhaps less than a week remains until the Legislature is called into special session by the Governor in one final attempt to address the ruling handed down by the Arkansas Supreme Court regarding the issues raised in *Lakeview*. Space in this article would not allow me to even summarize all the tangents of thoughts associated with what might be a solution to providing an equitable and adequate education for all the children in this state. I hope there are some basic tenets which surfaces when and if a plan is adopted.

1. Where a child lives geographically will not unduly limit the scope of his or her educational opportunities. I use “unduly” because while all men are born equal the circumstances of life immediately tilt the scale. The first five years of a child’s life, who is born to Wal-Mart executives in Bentonville, will differ from the child born to parents who stock the shelves and scan the items at the checkout of the Wal-Mart store in McGehee, Arkansas. I judge not which child will come to school better ready to learn. You and I could make a case for either child for varying reasons, yet I think we would agree that the children would come with different backgrounds.
2. The color of a child’s skin will not unduly limit the scope of his or her educational opportunities. Having my 28 years in education roughly divided between the Delta and Northwest Arkansas allows me to observe that all children are more alike than they are different. But it also allows me to realize that non-English speaking children have an additional hurdle to jump just to get on the playing field. I note, only slightly with tongue-in-cheek, that some of those non-English speaking children are Caucasians. Culture and home environment are causative; color is decorative.
3. A child’s inherent abilities and aptitudes will not unduly limit the scope of his or her educational opportunities. Every child will not be a nuclear physicist, a physician, an attorney, a dentist, or a teacher. Not every child will, or will need to, go to college. An expanded curriculum must offer children an opportunity to pursue and acquire

- skills in areas and vocations where post-secondary education is of the hands-on nature rather than “pure” science.
4. A child’s classroom teacher’s take home pay will not unduly limit the scope of his or her educational opportunities. In the real world the highest paying jobs often attract the “best” candidates. However, in those arenas where pay is a prime motivator, there is an equal pressure to produce or perish. Teacher salaries must be both raised and equalized across the state whether there are 308 school districts or 208. If not, it will always be the Fayetteville’s who have first pick and not the Earle’s. In the same sense, an accountability system that quickly removes non-performers from the teaching ranks must be put into place or the end result will be high paid incompetents rather than low paid incompetents.
 5. A child’s classroom environment will not unduly limit the scope of his or her educational opportunities. No real commentary needed here. All children should have a clean, safe, pleasant atmosphere in which to learn. There must be some minimum facility standards adopted and enforced for every school district in the state.
 6. A child’s parents will not unduly limit the scope of his or her educational opportunities. Do you find it amazing that imperfect parents always give birth to perfect children? Don’t take my word on that. Ask the parent, or grandparent, of any newborn. But sadly that is not always a true slice of reality. Many children are born to parents who have, for a myriad of reasons, limited parenting skills. Some consideration needs to be given to not just involving parents but also to offering training to those who desire it. (I will not offer to be a trainer....just not qualified there as an expert.)
 7. A child’s legislator will not unduly limit the scope of his or her educational opportunities. There are many dogs in this hunt; all are barking with vigor as they chase the elusive rabbit of providing a plan that will appease the court, ward off future lawsuits in federal court, actually do the job, and not bankrupt the citizens of the state. Like any good rabbit hunt there is the Catch 22 aspect of “To improve the economy of the state a better educated workforce is required...to provide a better educated workforce requires changing the economy of the state, especially in the areas of the state where economic deprivation is associated with poverty and, in its true definition, ignorance. This legislative body must be willing to seek what is best for all the state’s children without total regard being given to impassioned constituents. In some sense I hope they can be willing

to be called heroes as future generations look backwards even if it causes vilification in the present. If not, they should never have sought a public office, a position of service, or sought to be a leader of others.

8. A child's superintendent will not unduly limit the scope of his or her educational opportunities. See commentary above.
9. A child's school board will not unduly limit the scope of his or her educational opportunities. See commentary above.
10. A child's community and school patrons will not unduly limit the scope of his or her educational opportunities. See commentary above.

There is a court mandated opportunity here that may never come again as a chance to make voluntary changes which will benefit all, yes all, of the state's children. The "haves" and the "have-nots", the north of I-40 and west of I-30's and those in the opposite direction, the lumberjacks, the tycoons, the cotton-pickers, the poultry farmers, and those who represent them all have a chance to put aside personal, short-term, turf wars and focus on the future. I hope we do not blow this opportunity in the name of school pride.