

KeyOpinion

Are Our Schools Producing Fools?

Richard L. Hershatter
Contributing Columnist

**When our public education comes up lacking,
And the students seem to fail ev'ry test,
It may be that something's really, truly lacking,
Which means the problem needs to be addressed.**

Sarasota County's referendum has continued the one mill tax for education, and Manatee County is in the process of wrestling with the concept of establishing special tax districts to fund schools, all of which begs the question as to whether taxpayers are getting their money's worth in the field of education.

It may be true that public education is not doing an adequate job of educating the citizenry.

How else can we explain voters continuing to elect the types of characters holding governmental office today?

How else to excuse citizen tolerance of corruption among elected members of the legislative and executive branches of state and federal government?

The Tom Delays, the "Scooter" Libbys and the Jack Abramoffs in the public eye did not just suddenly happen. They have been abusing power and contaminating the body politic for many years.

In addition to the three essentials of education — reading, writing and arithmetic — all public schools are mandated by law to offer courses in civics and history, to present the lessons describing the struggles and heroic characters who brought forth a free nation governed by a Constitution envied and often emulated throughout the world.

Every student should have been exposed to the ingenious system of checks and balances created by our founding fathers, who fought and won a revolution against royal tyranny on the basic premise that "that government is best which governs least."

Somewhere along the line, education has failed. There is no outrage at the egregious conduct of lobbyists and legislators — no umbrage against grievous state and federal executive interference with the actions of consenting adults in the privacy of their homes or in their

relations with their doctors.

Both the Constitution of the United States and the Constitution of the State of Florida mandate public education. The federal government has instituted a system supposedly designed to measure and improve its quality, although, as with most federal mandates, it has failed to sufficiently fund the desired improvements.

Florida attempted to meet any deficiency by passing a so-called "Opportunity Scholarship Program," which provided vouchers to attend private schools, at taxpayer expense, for any student attending a school that failed to live up to national standards.

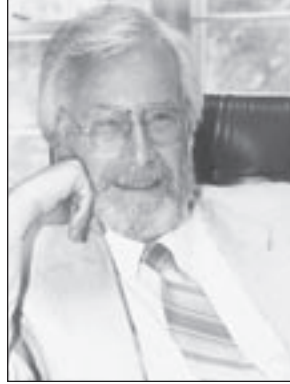
Seven hundred thirty-three students took advantage of the program, which proved financially beneficial to parochial and private schools. On appeal, however, Florida's Supreme Court struck the statute down as a violation of the State Constitution, because monies so diverted to private schools were taken from available public school funds, thereby diminishing assets needed for public education.

As previously mentioned in earlier columns, Florida is noted for sunshine, oranges and loopholes.

As this is being written, the Governor and state legislature are following the pattern they previously set in the Terri Schaivo case and are actively seeking a way around the Supreme Court's ruling, either by a Constitutional amendment or by an end run around the law, or both.

The end run would induce business corporations to provide private school tuition to students in exchange for corporate tax breaks — an insidious scheme that, if enacted, could no more pass Supreme Court muster than the ill-fated voucher program.

If the voters let Tallahassee get away with any such misuse of funds extracted from the taxpayers, it will call to mind the old conundrum of "which came first, the



chicken or the egg?"

Do we have poor schools because of poor government, or is government poor because the schools are not educating our citizens properly?

In the final analysis, it makes little difference. To paraphrase Sancho Panza in Man of La Mancha: "Whether the stone hits the pitcher, or the pitcher hits the stone, it's still going to be bad for the pitcher."

This column is not intended to be vitriolic. In the interests of full disclosure, however, be advised that in an earlier incarnation before retirement, the writer represented a number of Boards of Education as a practicing attorney in his native State and served a term as president of the State School Attorney's Council.

He also admits to being a life-long Republican who served three terms as a Republican Town Chairman and now wonders whether Abraham Lincoln would recognize the Party he founded if he could see it today.

If the voters cannot cure the corruption and incompetence endemic in present leadership, then perhaps the solution lies in the imposition of term limits, on both a state and national level.

Presidents since Franklin Roosevelt are limited to two terms, and it is suggested that two four-year terms for senators and three two-year terms for congressmen would reduce the amount of time available for "power to corrupt absolutely."

**The time has come, the walrus said,
To speak of many things,
And let our errant leaders know,
They're servants, and not kings.**

**It's time to see some changes made
To notify each faction
The voting public's not afraid
To take corrective action.**

(apologies to Lewis Carroll)

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Gasoline Prices — Going Up and Up

Tom Burgum
Contributing Columnist

The realities of the energy crisis might well have been driven home last week. Many consumers were stunned when they discovered it took over 45 dollars to fill their "Belch Fire V8" with gasoline. On Longboat Key, the price of premium had reached \$3.19 at one station and prices in the Bradenton-Sarasota area were almost as high. The bad news is that the price is going to continue to go up for the foreseeable future. But there is good news about national energy policy. Recently the Democrats and Republicans finally managed to put aside their partisan differences and formulate a new energy initiative. As always, there is bad news with the good. The bad news is they, of course, got it wrong.

According to the Wall Street Journal, "Even the government is admitting that some of the price increases and regional shortages are the result of the ethanol love-fest that Congress engaged in last summer as part of its energy bill." The Wall Street Journal was referring to the elimination of an oxygenate called MTBE and mandating more extensive use of alcohol. The Clean Air Act of 1990 (CAA) required use of such oxygenates as MTBE and ethanol in gasoline. Although, MTBE has been used in U.S. gasoline at low levels since 1979 to replace lead as an octane enhancer. Since 1992, MTBE has been used at higher concentrations in some gasoline to fulfill the oxygenate requirements set by Congress in the CAA. According to the Department of Energy, "About 30 percent of this country's gasoline is reformulated, of which about 87 percent contains MTBE." Alcohol has been used to some extent, particularly in the Midwest, but its use is limited by the difficulty and cost of transporting alcohol long distances.

You might well wonder what happened to MTBE and what triggered the ethanol love-fest. MTBE began showing up in groundwater and wells in different parts of the country and the question was raised as to potential health hazards. DOE reported that, "Independent expert

review groups who have assessed MTBE have not concluded that the use of MTBE-oxygenated gasoline poses an imminent threat to public health." However, the Environmental Protection Agency concluded that "MTBE is a potential human carcinogen at high doses." Be careful on this one. The research was conducted on mice who were feed amounts 70,000 times larger than any human would likely encounter. You have to be a bit careful with EPA analyses. Truth is, if a researcher fell into a vat of MTBE and drowned, the EPA conclusion would be that it is harmful in high doses. Still, many jurisdictions immediately demanded a halt to the use of the additive and began to hold refiners responsible for any environmental damage, real or imagined.

Enter now the farm lobby. The lobbyists for the approximately 100,000 farmers and the alcohol lobby (read Archers Daniel Midland Company - ADM) somehow managed to convince our esteemed national legislature to mandate increased use of ethanol while, as noted in the Wall Street Journal, "... denying liability protection for the rival MTBE makers who are getting sued for having sold a product that Congress had once mandated." Valero, one of the nations leading refiners has already stopped producing and blending MTBE in gasoline. The company said, "It is taking the action because refiners didn't receive liability protection regarding the additive in the energy bill passed ... by Congress." Valero's decision could result in a loss to the domestic market of 2.5 million gallons a day and, according to the Journal, "MTBE makers are now fleeing the market; most oil companies will drop the additive entirely on May 5. So bye-bye to a significant portion of the domestic fuel sup-



ply, which already stretched ethanol producers have no hope of replacing any time soon."

The loss will be very serious. MTBE currently is an important part of our gasoline supply. A spokesman for Valero said, "The market could lose a total of about 10.9 million gallons of gas a day." You can well imagine what the laws of supply and demand will do with this one. Some of the pressure might be relieved from the price of gasoline under the new requirements by removing the 54 cent a gallon duty on imported alcohol. This would be particularly helpful in coastal areas. But the Bush administration, once again adrift on the policy seas, has dropped its commitment to free trade in deference to a few farmers and the alcohol lobby. Bush seems much better at staying the course when operating in foreign parts.

There are other factors causing higher gasoline prices, factors the government could actually do something about. This country lacks sufficient refining capacity and the demands are for many different formulations of gasoline. It can take almost 15 years to bring a new refinery on line due to environmental requirements and the inevitable law suits. Environmental regulations also require different blends for different areas at different times of the year. There are now 18 different gasoline formulations in use across the United States. The need to switch from one blend to another increases cost, particularly in the summer.

The cost imposed by foreign oil cartels might be somewhat alleviated if domestic sources of supply were enhanced. But it seems we have deeded the entire State of Alaska to the caribou. According to comedian Dennis Miller, a caribou, if you didn't know, is a reindeer that didn't make the Santa Claus cut. The same people who object to three-dollar gasoline don't want any platforms in the Gulf of Mexico, or drilling where it might endanger some rare beast or plant — even where there is little chance of such damage.

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