

OUR VIEW

Problems With The Proficiency

On Friday's installment of the "Black Power" radio talk show on KCEP FM 88.1 — hosted by Sentinel-Voice publisher Ramon Savoy — former Assembly Education Chairman Wendell Williams and current State Board of Education member Marcia Washington lamented the fact that students who are homeschooled and attend private school are exempt from taking the state proficiency exam, the test all public high school students must pass in order to graduate with a diploma.

This is patently unfair, doubly so when you consider that the 1997 Nevada Education Reform Act (which, incidentally, was a nearly identical precursor to the controversial federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001) toughened educational standards — in hopes of igniting a faster turnaround of the state's sagging educational system — but did little to prepare students to meet those heightened thresholds.

Since its implementation, the state proficiency exam has bedeviled scores of high school students. Each year, thousands take the test — which covers math, English and writing; in 2007, science will be added — and each year thousands fail. Even with four cracks at passing, tons of seniors often come up short. Two years ago, nearly 7,000 seniors failed on their first three attempts, meaning their educational futures (not to mention their hopes, dreams and self-esteem) hinged on one final try. On the last go-round, several thousand still fell short.

On the surface, exemptions for private and homeschooled students would seem to defy logic. Those students will have to compete for spots in the same colleges and universities, and later, for the same jobs in the corporate world as public school students will. Why, then, are they being insulated, protected? Why shouldn't they be compelled to compete academically on a test designed to measure aptitude on what are supposed to be uniform state requirements?

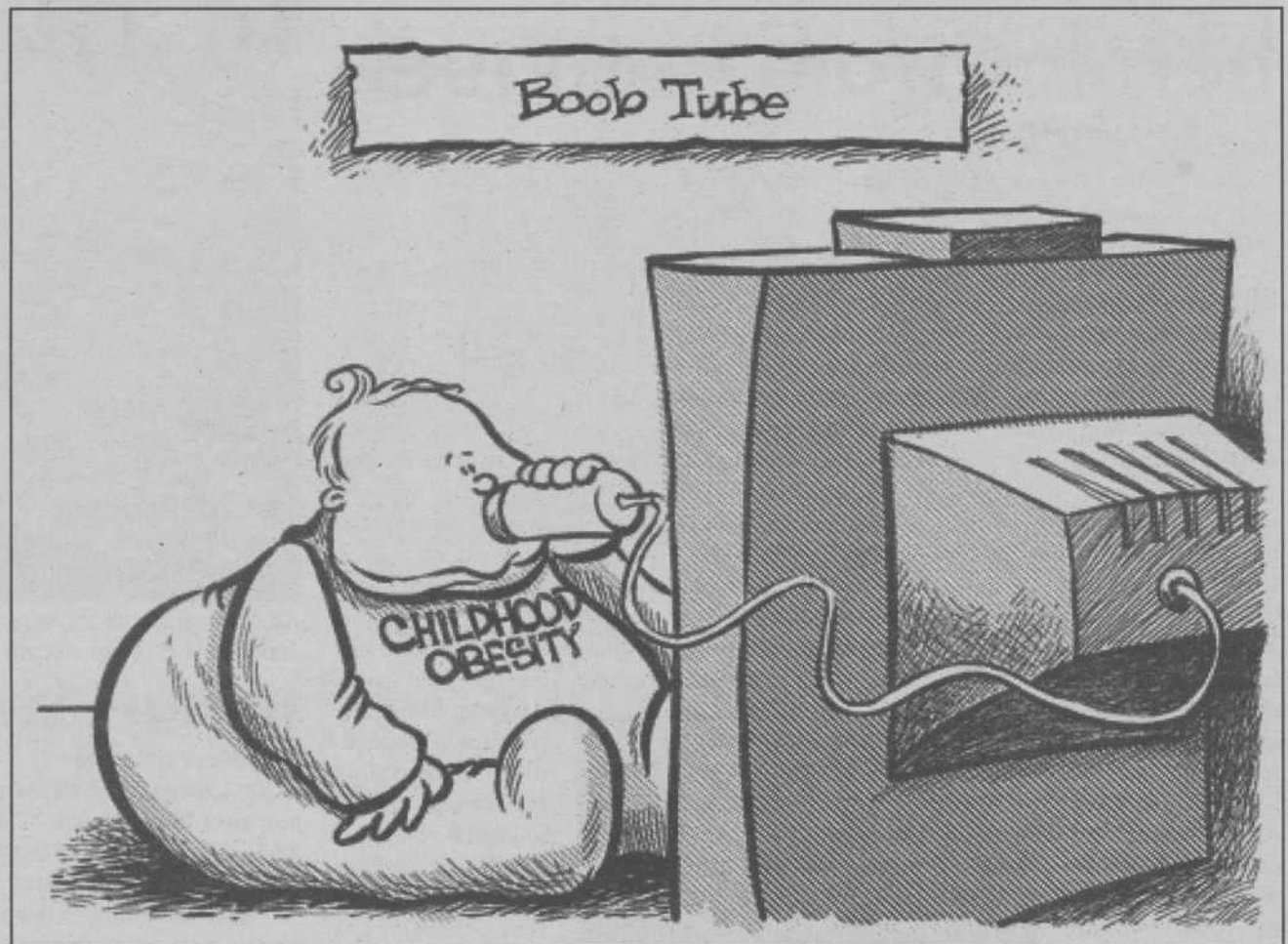
Standards are standards, right?

Let's dispense with the perception that private schools automatically connote a higher level of education and, by extension, a better caliber of student (read: person). Fact is, private schools are a microcosm of society, just as much as public schools are and, thus, they have the same problems and issues as their taxpayer-funded counterparts. And their students should be held to the same requirements.

The major difference between private and public schools lies, of course, in funding disparities: since private schools have access to more money, their administrators can invest in people and programs. Conversely, Nevada's public schools rely on image-conscious legislators who, if it means offending the moneyed and powerful people and groups that filled their campaign war chests, would throw the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak. For context, just rewind to the 2003 legislative session when most everyone agreed that more taxes were needed to fund our rapidly growing education system, but nearly no one agreed on how to make it happen. Private schools and students who are homeschooled are lucky in the sense that that the state legislative biennial political civil wars over education funding are largely of no concern to them.

Now, no rational person will begrudge parents' rights to pursue the best educational opportunities for their children. That could go right along with life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as an inalienable right. But what is patently unfair — and needs to be quickly rectified — is the systematic inequality of subjecting one set of students to a winner-take-all test that has great bearing on their future, while letting another set of students get off scot-free. It's time to change the system.

POINT OF VIEW



CAAN taking politics to Carson City

By Dora La Grande
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Twenty-two members of CAAN (Caucus of African-American Nevadans) will travel to Carson City on Monday to present their legislative agenda for the African-American community during the 73rd Session of the Nevada State Legislature.

They are hosting a luncheon at the legislative building from 11:30 a.m. until 2 p.m. for the members of the assembly and senate, including Governor Kenny Guinn.

The members and leadership of CAAN recognize that the need for political status is imperative for change within the Black community. African-Americans, like every other group, want to influence the decisions that affect their lives and the lives of their families, the political economy and the destiny of their communities and nations, as well as the structure of international relations. The group is honored to be able to participate in the political process at this level.

There is recognition among all of the members, including myself, that political participation and representation is essential for the achievement of these ends, and there is growing recognition among the membership that economic participation and political participation cannot be separated. As spoken by W.E.B. DuBois,



"Without an economic basis there is no political status."

Institutional transformations are needed to create an enabling environment for the economic and political empowerment of African-Americans. A more profound understanding of the barriers in labor markets and remuneration processes is also necessary as a precondition for a transformation. This is particularly important since African-American economic independence is critical for our exercise of influence on decisions that affect our families and communities.

To that end, CAAN has formulated what is deemed to be a comprehensive legislative agenda that outlines their positions in five key areas: Economic Development and Urban Renewal; Education; Ex-Offenders; Procurement and Contracting; and Banking.

The following details the status and prime advantages of a few of the assembly bills (A.B.), senate bills (S.B.) and Bill Draft Requests (BDR) that CAAN is supporting as of this writing:

A.B. 87—minimum wage increase from \$5.15 per hour

to \$6.15 per hour helps mitigate the gross disparity in the ability of the working poor to afford the basic necessities of life

S.B. 229 — creates tax incentives for economic development in designated Enterprise/Hub zones in Las Vegas (has been referred to Committee on Government Affairs)

BDR 27-724 —provides preference on certain public contracts by women or persons who are members of racial and ethnic minorities (hasn't been heard on floor yet)

BDR 1251—a resolution to name a Clark County School after Dr. Claude

Perkins (hasn't been heard yet, and the committee hopes to have it heard on the 28th while CAAN is at the legislature)

BDR 1228—a proposed bill that is designed to locate a career and technical high school in West Las Vegas (hasn't been heard yet)

While the initial deadline for the bills to come out of committee was Monday, the bills that haven't been heard are not dead because the deadline was extended until this Friday. Those who are familiar with and will support any of the above legislation or resolutions, please contact your legislator at 486-2626.

While considerable progress has taken place in African-American political participation, the 21st Century began with enormous unfinished business in this realm. CAAN is working diligently to take care of that (See La Grande, Page 11)

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