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FROM THE PUBLISHER

Great move on phones in school

Three cheers to Manhattan High, the school district and the school board. They’ve decided to ban phones in classrooms, a giant step forward.

There’s no disputing the evidence anymore – phones get in the way of learning. They also have serious psychological and sociological drawbacks, but that’s generally beside the point. Schools are in the business of teaching, and anything that harms that should be minimized. That’s why there are things like dress codes, too.

I think they’ve hit the right balance, too: Kids can use their phones between classes and at lunch, which I guess allows them to practice interacting with the digital world that increasingly dominates the actual physical world we otherwise inhabit. My gut impulse is to require all kids to throw all of their gadgets into the Kansas River, but I recognize that’s mostly the Luddite in me. Learning would be improved, but, well, there are always tradeoffs. Learning would also be improved if kids wore uniforms and never talked to each other, too. I’m aware that classroom pedagogy is not the only thing going on where Poyntz turns into Westwood.

There will no doubt be violations, and there’s a system of consequences that at least at first blush seems to make sense. I imagine a few parents at some point will throw a fit, too, insisting that their kids answer texts during class, objecting to totalitarian tactics by a teacher who makes the kid give up the phone to silence the inevitable dings. I would presume reasonableness will prevail here, but we’re about to enter new territory.

Kids will also try to find loopholes, since that’s what kids do. They’ll text on laptops, surreptitiously slip AirPods in when the sub isn’t looking, go to the bathroom 27 times a day just to get a sneak peek at the girlfriend’s Snaps. You can’t put security cameras in bathrooms, you know. “But I have a small bladder!” or “You can’t punish me because it’s my time of the month!” or “Trig gives me diarrhea!”

How to police all that will become the next frontier, and administrators and school board members need to prepare for the inevitable indignant speechifying. Parents, as you probably know, increasingly side with kids rather than teachers, when in doubt. That’s changed in a generation, but that’s another column.

But this is a battle worth fighting. As MHS Principal Michael Dorst said to the school board: “Today is the worst day that screens are affecting youth in schools. This is the worst it’s ever been in humankind and tomorrow will be worse. August will be worse, will be horrible if you don’t do something.”

Also, credit to district officials and school board members for sparking discussions and readings about research on the topic. “We know more about the damages of screen time and excessive use than we did a year ago,” Dorst said.

In other words, it’s time.

— Ned Seaton



Thanks to Pete Hegseth, I’m censored more here than in China

Peter S. Wenz
Chicago Tribune

Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth has evicted an anthology I co-edited with philosopher Laura Westra from the U.S. Naval Academy library. I don’t know about Laura, but I’m pleased that they thought some midshipman may want to read “Faces of Environmental Racism,” published initially in 1995. In the 30 years since, we may have poisoned the minds of some midshipmen who are now captains or even admirals. Or Hegseth may just be protecting young sailors with dust allergies from picking up the book.

My more serious guess is that the term “racism” is the reason for the book’s expulsion. It combines case studies with theoretical analyses of racism in public and private decision-making, mostly regarding land use. The subject is environmental racism, a subtopic of environmental justice. I am among a handful of people who, entirely independently of one another, coined the term “environmental justice” in the early 1980s, and my book “Environmental Justice” (State University of New York Press, 1988) is the first to use the expression anywhere in the title or subtitle of any book.

The administration of President Donald Trump has a penchant toward one-sided views, which explains its attempts to stifle alternative narratives, claiming them to be one-sided, which they often are. Consider critical race theory. In my view, it’s supported by a great deal of evidence, but it’s one-sided. Progress in race relations is given short shrift.

Similarly, but on the opposite side, Thomas Sowell’s “The Vision of the Anointed” castigates liberals for claiming that they alone occupy the

moral high ground. Sowell is correct about liberals, but his thesis that only liberals do this is all wrong. He ignores conservatives doing the very same thing — for example, “the moral majority.” Both critical race theory and Sowell’s view are valuable contributions, so long as alternative views are available, just as two sides are typically presented in judicial proceedings.

My contribution to the anthology mitigates the concentration on race. The disproportionate harm to minority communities, which are often poor, may result from poverty rather than race. Land is cheaper where poor people live, so the cost of destroying a community or lowering its land values due to pollution is less. Harming minorities follows from cost-benefit analysis. It reduces the monetary cost to society of promoting our material way of life. Informed discussion requires attention to both benefits and burdens. My article offers a procedure to reduce injustices caused by using only monetary measures of benefits and burdens when lives are at stake.

While all of us tend to appreciate the presentation of our own side more than that of the other side, the Chinese have been more open than Hegseth to my presentations, and that of others, on environmental matters. The Chinese government gave a grant to Northwest University in Xi’an to translate and publish Western works in environmental ethics. My book “Environmental Justice” was published in 2007 by the Shanghai People’s Publishing House.

In 2015, the Chinese government paid me to give lectures at two universities in Xi’an based largely on this book. Xi Jinping was already the head of government, so I asked my host if I should really lecture

students and larger gatherings of academics on the importance of human rights. I was told that this was fine, so I went ahead.

Such tolerance continued for years while Xi maintained his power. In 2021, a second translation of my book was published in Chinese, this time by Truth and Wisdom Press. I find it odd that China, a notorious abuser of human rights, would subsidize the publication of a book presenting ideas at odds with its ideology, whereas the Trump administration considers my thoughts too toxic to remain in a government library.

We should heed the wise words of English philosopher John Stuart Mill in “On Liberty”: “He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side, if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion.”

Adm. Chester W. Nimitz, after whom the U.S. Naval Academy’s library is named, awards Doris Miller the Navy Cross on the USS Enterprise in 1942 for his courageous actions during the attack on Pearl Harbor. An order by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth’s office resulted in a purge of books critical of racism but preserved volumes defending white power. (U.S. Navy) Leaders who stifled dissent, who insisted that only one side of important issues be presented — King Charles I of England and Adolf Hitler come to mind — didn’t serve their countries well. Currently, Nicolas Maduro, Vladimir Putin and the Kim dynasty, brooking no dissent, are devastating their countries.

We shouldn’t let that happen here.

Politics isn’t a game or a brutal war. In Kansas and the US, can’t it be an afternoon at the pub?

Clay Wirestone
Kansas Reflector

I hate how we talk about politics.

This might come as a surprise, because at least in part because my day job involves writing about politics in Kansas. But the exposure has solidified my belief that lawmakers, officials, journalists and the general public all could do a better job of thinking about what they’re doing and why.

Our conversation about politics fails at least in part because it’s inevitably couched in adversarial terms. In one metaphor, Democrats and Republicans are two teams fighting for victories. This leaves less-engaged members of the public as passive spectators and suggests that ideological debate exists only to score points for one side or another. Cue the cheers and pouring of Gatorade.

I hate that.

In another metaphor, the parties and their ideological camps fight a brutal war. This has become the favored interpretation recently, as politicians nursing grudges try to crush their opponents through the machinery of government.

During a war, both sides strive for enduring victory, and the ends might justify the means.

I hate that even more.

Each of these metaphors depends on fundamentally distorting the nature of governance. The game metaphor depicts statesmanship as meaningless posturing. The war metaphor insists that half of the country (pick your half) has gone to an irredeemably dark place.

In reality, we elect people to public office to make our state and nation better, representing us while they do so.

We can debate the “better,” and we can debate whom that “us” includes, but politics exist to shape government.

For that reason, I think we need a new metaphor, one that doesn’t pit Americans against one another. Perhaps this metaphor could cool temperatures and increase cooperation. Or maybe not. I’m trying to be realistic here.

Regardless, we should work toward thinking of politics as a neighborhood bar. Not an ominous dive, mind you, or a place for students to pick up one another. No, a cozy neighborhood watering hole, the kind of place called a “pub”

by our cousins in Britain or “Cheers” by Ted Danson and company.

If you’re not lucky enough to be familiar with such a spot, let me elaborate. It serves as a community gathering spot. It has regulars. The bartenders know the customers and chat, or don’t, as required. You can visit and read a book in the corner or debate philosophy. You can spend a couple of hours there with friends or drop by for 20 minutes. Whatever you like.

Such bars don’t primarily exist to intoxicate customers. Sure, people will have a drink or two, but the business doesn’t depend on customers imbibing to excess. No, the drinks serve as a bit of social lubricant. Folks might just have a soft drink and check up on friends.

What I appreciate about such bars is that any one person’s political leanings make no difference. The customer might be a diehard MAGA supporter or pushy progressive. Regardless, if you insult the bartender or order too many drinks, you’re not welcome. If you’re friendly and get along with others, you have an open invitation to visit. How you behave matters.

Sure, you encounter some loudmouths. You put up with some cranks. But you accept them as part of the scenery.

Our country would be stronger if we engaged in politics the way people visit such bars. A variety of people come together, with mutual respect. Differences can be aired, or not, depending on how we feel. And everyone unites if something needs to be done. In a bar like this, if someone gets sick or has an emergency, everyone springs into action. The bartender calls for assistance. Others will tend to the distressed person. Still others will watch outside for help to arrive.

You don’t see such behavior just in bars, of course.

You can see it in coffee shops or restaurants that the enjoy the patronage of regulars. You can see it in social clubs and certain houses of worship. You can see it at trivia nights and bowling leagues. You can see it among extended families.

In all of these circumstances, we primarily value one another as people — not as politicians or activists, not as Democrats or Republicans, not as liberals or conservatives.

We give one another the benefit of the doubt and wish the best for them and their loved ones and families.

Unfortunately, we live in a turbocharged political world. No one benefits from unilateral disarmament, so extremism spirals. Treating government debates as pitched battles leads to extreme rhetoric and destructive actions. Policy-making suffers, and the general public pays the price.

In my job as Kansas Reflector opinion editor and columnist, I work in this context. That means I often write forcefully, passionately. Real people and their families have become entangled in the rhetoric. The consequences appear so grave that no other course makes sense. I can’t be the one man sipping a cocktail while others aim howitzers and launch Hail Marys.

I hope that in years to come we can somehow wrench ourselves away from that narrow, zero-sum approach to politics and toward a community-focused, humanistic approach. Such a change would take everyone deciding to rethink our basic approach toward local, state and federal government.

I wouldn’t hate that.