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Nov. 6, 2016

Governor Gina Raimondo  
222 State House  
Providence, R.I. 02903

I'm a retired educator who in 42 years taught and counseled in private schools and one public school, with half of those years as a counselor, especially in college placement.

My interest in education has not abated, so I was delighted to read about your efforts towards a new funding formula and to make R.I. schools more competitive with the nation and especially N.E. schools.

I communicated with a legislator the last time the funding formula was changed and also with Education Commissioner Deborah Gist, as I elaborate.

I'm particularly interested in your charge to your working group in the areas of special education and attendance.

I wrote to Miss Gist when I read that 20 percent (29,000!) of R.I. kids were in special education, as opposed to the nation's average of 12! She reduced it to 20 percent. One child expert said it should be around 5. No wonder, I thought, the state has a chronically-low number of qualified workers for its jobs. I also read once where 67 percent of S.E. students were not employed or employable. (I enclose an article about the overuse labeling of ADHD in drugging our kids so much, often I suspect for nothing more than boyish aggressiveness. Boys now are deemed 5 to 1, compared to girls, in learning problems. Again, is it just aggressiveness, as one teacher complained to me? Behavior problems, not learning disability.)

It also came to my attention in my one public school some P.E. students felt they were simply being warehoused, accounting therefore for their lack of interest and ambition. In my 18 years in that one public school, I only recommended one student for special education, preferring "inclusion," as was becoming popular in MA (great scores nationally), into regular classes, which for us were Basic, Standard, CP, and AP. Nearly all I recommended graduated, and I helped them get into a nearby community college. Our college percentage went up from 39 percent to 92. Instead of focusing on behavioral disabilities to Sped a potential student, I looked, if any, for more positive disabilities, like some deafness, physical and mental problems, poor eyesight, for which services were already in place from grammar grades. The school's S.E. program, I should say, was rated highly by the state, so **real** learning problems were met.

But one day our superintendent called all of us counselors about how many kids were being Spedded. He told counselors to be more restrictive in their evaluations. Fifteen percent of those kids were eating 30 percent of the school budget (moneys from the state always arriving late) than regular students. (I felt justified I was into "inclusion" instead of Spedding.). I read that parents - poor, not greatly educated, with language problems, whose boys especially were negative about education - preferred special education because of smaller classes and more help. Questionable choice for their future.

At one time a school committee person in Woonsocket told me school systems with more sped students received twice as much per student from the state. But I believe that's no longer in effect. We need to challenge our kids more, not less. Alan Tenreiro, proud graduate of Mt. St. Charles Academy where I counseled, and winner of the nation's top principal award, quickly upped all his CHS' curriculum to college prep status. Wasn't there an effort before Congress years ago to lessen reasons for P.E? Failed!

Another outstanding reason for our troubled state school system is absenteeism. It's often mentioned, as it was by the PJ recently, but can anything be done about it? Did stats show Latino children are more numerous than other nationalities, drop out more, and are more unemployable, and I suspect absent more often?. Parents who are poor, uneducated, with basic English-speaking skills, no college aspirations for their children, and too condoning of their children's absences, hurt the state's standing. One wrote their dropout rate doesn't bode well for the nation now and later when they will be the majority by 2050. But low achieving school systems always seem to want more money, as if the reason for their bad scores. One article said bright kids are now the "new special ed kids of schools," since most moneys go to low achieving students and programs. (One of my BC professors said it was not realistic to expect all of today's kids to graduate from high school, since the curriculum is now what used to be the first two years of college. Many immigrant children come to R.I. One article in the PJ said the Providence school system counted 87 languages in its students. A great challenge.)

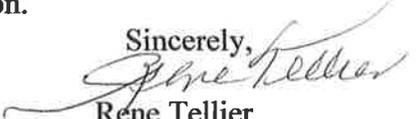
It may be draconian, but I feel school systems like Woonsocket, for one, with the highest (or close) absenteeism record should actually return money "not used" because of high absenteeism, like others too. Or their next year's appropriation reduced! All of us taxpayers pour extra wasted money on those systems. I heard about two systems in the South with novel approaches. In one of them, parents were fined by a judge because of their children's absences, again because of money appropriated and lost .by them.

Secondly, in another school system.. a count is taken of each student every day to determine money appropriation by the number of kids in schools overall. The principal, for one, worked very hard to get his kids to school. Do all school systems have truant officers like in yesteryear? Teachers of course are not responsible for absentees, but they and administrators must emphasize that attendance, as I suggested in my one public school, be a grade factor. The administration agreed. And suspended kids were not sent home, but to a special classroom, with work, and monitored by a Sped teacher. Kids like to socialize in school, so missing lunch and classes with their friends helped contrition.

Before I close I want to emphasize in my one public school we did make attendance part of passing. Ten absences, even with a passing grade, meant loss of half a credit in that course. From my readings I knew we weren't the only ones doing it. At the end of the school year, all teachers after finals submitted to me (I worked an extra week) a list of failures in their classes. I checked those lists to see if students had 24, 48, 72, 90 credits to promote from 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th (graduation) and if students had passed required subjects for promotion and/or graduation, like English, math, science. No one was ever assigned, for example, two English classes in the fall. Summer school, as I now show.

And the administration also gave me permission to write to every parent whose child's record didn't allow promotion and graduation, and he or she had to attend summer school. We abolished automatic promotion. A few parents grumbled at first, but nearly all

summer school kids never had to go more than once! Public school parents are not accustomed to paying directly for education, and they let their kids know. Excuse the long letter, but stress your attention on excessive special education numbers and absenteeism (a lot of money down the drain!) to improve R.I. education.

Sincerely,  
  
Rene Tellier

P.S.

Every committee member should be given a copy of the PJ's attendance record for each school. I lost mine. Also get from every school or the central administration how many P.E. students they have. We were pleased to see only 3 or seniors not graduate after our new policies. Before that, 15 or more. Some seniors got their diploma after summer school. We wanted every kid ready for college, jobs, military. We became one of the best public schools in Southeastern MA. I've read every article about testing, and my gut feeling is that there's a fear it may exposed how bad some schools are. Personally I always felt I got a lot of my education by thoroughly reviewing the quarter's material before tests. I also read if a kid failed to promote twice, he, she, was a potential dropout. Why we made summer school necessary. I even sent kids to night school during the regular year, if summer school wasn't done or sufficient. As one said, the first recruiting should be to keep the students you've got.

We had a reasonable dress code, but hats and jackets were not allowed. As obvious, I was responsible for many of the changes, since the principal knowing I came from an Academy and his school wasn't good asked me. The superintendent who ran a tight ship agreed to all "my white paper" suggestions. He felt if a student wanted to continue his education after graduation, we hadn't stifled his learning curiosity, but increased it. And of course, he, like every one, loved those high college admissions numbers. Even now, not going to community college is a \$half-million hit in one's lifetime! I'm fully retired now and only write to offer suggestions and memory of what I did and read that worked. Research from your committee may come up with more precise figures than mine, especially on absenteeism, by whom and by how much. I don't mean to belittle or misrepresent any group, especially if I failed to give you exact figures on that problem.

Rene Tellier`

# Beware those

**GRETCHEN B. LEFEVER**

VIRGINIA BEACH, Va.  
**WHEN THE PORTSMOUTH School** Board in southeastern Virginia sent a flier home to parents warning them about the epidemic of children misdiagnosed with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and prescribed unnecessary psychiatric drugs, six national and eight local organizations responded in protest, according to an Oct. 19 story in *The Virginian-Pilot*.

But the Oct. 27 follow-up story indicated that the board chair received hundreds of mostly favorable e-mails.

The board deserves to be commended for sounding an alarm. Published research (e.g., <http://www.srmhp.org/0201/adhd.html>) has documented that ADHD treatment among children in Portsmouth exceeds all national estimates and guidelines. Up to 14 percent of the region's elementary-school children (27 percent of black boys and 33 percent of white boys) have been diagnosed with ADHD.

Improper ADHD care is a national concern. Because basic questions about ADHD are controversial, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) convened an expert panel of unbiased scientists to review ADHD research. The 1998 panel concluded that there was strong evidence that the disorder probably does exist, but that it affects only 3-5 percent of children. It also concluded that there are serious problems with how ADHD is diagnosed. According to a pediatric IJH panel member Mark Vonnegut, M.D. (son of the late Kurt Vonnegut, the writer), "The diagnosis of ADHD is a mess."

More recently, national research has documented that less than one-third of primary-care physicians adhere to established diagnostic criteria. As previously reported in *The Virginian-Pilot*, two-thirds of pediatric providers in southeastern Virginia acknowledged that children in the area do not receive adequate diagnostic evaluations. Nationally, rates of treatment have increased, but not necessarily the number of disordered children.

According to the CDC, as of 2003, up to 14 percent of American boys had been diagnosed with ADHD, and treatment patterns varied considerably across states. The rate of ADHD diagnosis was 5 percent for California and 11 percent for Alabama. Treatment rates vary even more widely across communities. In 1999, for example, the relative rate of Ritalin use was 100 times greater in some U.S. cities than in others.

When a 2006 Food and Drug Administration (FDA) advisory committee recommended use of "black-box warning" labels for ADHD drugs, prominent groups such as the American Academy of Pediatrics protested. Nonetheless, the FDA warning was upheld. Dr. Steven Nissen, cardiologist and FDA panel member, expressed worry that stimulant drugs are vastly overprescribed for ADHD and that the cardiovascular risks are under-appreciated. He also noted that he was not surprised by the reaction of pediatric groups: "It's difficult to find physicians willing to stand up to industry."

The FDA was able to withstand intense opposition. Will Portsmouth school administrators be able to resist pressure from the Tidewater chapter of Children and Adults

# 11/07 pushing anti-ADHD drugs

with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD), the Virginia Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, and others who suggest distributing materials that advocate for more of the same standard (i.e., problematic) practices?

In any event, parents should be warned that professionals who argue that ADHD is under-medicated may be motivated by money tied to the industry or lucrative "ADHD" clinical practices.

Gretchen B. LeFever is a clinical psychologist and a professor of education at Regent University.

*The Pilot*