

... DISTORTIONS ABOUT MEDICAL TESTS

RECENTLY I devoted a column to an unfortunate *Forbes* magazine article about Kentucky. In the space above today, we are publishing a response from Camille Wagner, of Parents and Professionals Involved in Education, who says I didn't seriously consider the main thrust of that *Forbes* piece.



DAVID HAWPE

Odd. I thought that's exactly what I did.

I've been in journalism since the sixth grade, when I became editor of *The Scout News* at Charles D. Jacob Elementary School.

Although I have clearer memories of the schoolyard softball field than I

do of the precise journalism instruction I got back then, I do remember being told that the headline describes the story.

In *Forbes* the overline said, "Big Foundations are imposing their private agendas on state governments. How? By thinly disguised bribery." Below that the headline read: "Trojan horse money."

Now here's what I said: "The article's thesis is that private foundations are taking over — that they're overrun by social engineers who want to buy control of public policy."

You decide whether I was fair.

Meanwhile, since Ms. Wagner didn't think I was clear enough the first time, let me add this:

That *Forbes* article's thesis is bunk.

The writer, I believe, is reflecting the concerns of a small minority of conservative parents who fear that society is imposing repugnant values on innocent children — and that KERA is one example.

Sure, public education does involve a transfer of values. But the irony is that KERA empowers parents to participate fully in that exchange, in a more meaningful way than ever before. Each individual school is made accountable. Each is operated by a council with elected parent members. And social services are delivered through a family resource center, located right there in each school.

The whole point is to promote as much parent awareness and parent participation as possible, and to arrange for parents to do more than bake cookies and chaperone field trips.

The *Forbes* piece suggested that

real power is exercised covertly, by foundations that give money to the state for public programs.

And Ms. Wagner argues that "no one is naive enough to think that there are no strings attached" to the private foundation grants that the state has pursued and accepted, "including the Carnegie Foundation which brought us KERA."

That's just a monumental misreading of history. Or worse.

Foundation grants are minuscule, contrasted against state outlays. Besides, the Carnegie Foundation did not "bring us KERA." Rather, KERA grew out of a long, arduous grassroots effort to improve elementary and secondary education in Kentucky, nurtured by Gov. Martha Layne Collins, endorsed by Gov. Wallace Wilkinson, and protected by Govs. Brereton Jones and Paul Patton. The General Assembly created and funded the program, in an open and inclusive process. The debate over implementing and improving it continues, in a more or less responsible way.

Occasionally something like the *Forbes* article crops up, but not often.

In her letter today, Camille Wagner describes Kentucky as "a kept state." She argues, "We are so tied up in these strings that we have surely lost much of our autonomy."

What strings?

"Foundation grants are minuscule, contrasted against state outlays. Besides, the Carnegie Foundation did not 'bring us KERA.' Rather, KERA grew out of a long, arduous grassroots effort to improve elementary and secondary education in Kentucky. . . ."

She offers a copy of the medical examination form that was mentioned at the beginning of the infamous *Forbes* piece. She repeats the story of a state-required student medical exam that allegedly was mishandled three years ago in Owensboro. The child's mother (unnamed) is said to have been shocked because the doctor intended to include a genital examination that is "required by the Department of Education as part of an "intrusive program" that was "bankrolled by a private foundation."

I asked Jim Parks at the Department of Education about the medical exams that are required for children in Kentucky's public schools.

He points out that the document in question "is the form distributed by the department to schools and the medical community as a guide to the exams." Notice the word *guide*. And, "The Kentucky Administrative Regulation which sets forth procedures for the required physicals references the form by name, but does not require any specific medical

procedures."

The form for the physicals that kids take "has been in effect for many years."

No foundation with suspect values dreamed up this form, or imposed it on Kentucky kids.

After I sent it to him, Jim Parks showed the form to several top policy makers in the department, all of whom have long experience in school administration, some of whom are parents of children who have had one of the required exams in recent years. Jim reported that, while the option of a visual genital exam apparently has been included for many years, probably decades, "no one is aware of any complaints or controversies about this being included as part of the examination or any questions being raised about the way medical professionals conduct the exam."

The department, showing more equanimity than I would have, is re-examining the issue in the backwash of the inflammatory *Forbes* piece, but as Mr. Parks said, "Apparently this is another case of a long-standing practice that has been performed responsibly by school and medical professionals — and understood and accepted by parents — being called into question by ideologues suffering from Big Brother paranoia."

Terry Vance, the department's school health consultant, explained in a post-*Forbes* memo that the Academy of Pediatrics in Kentucky supports this school physical exam form, which is "consistent with every physical examination form, regardless of where the form originates."

Ms. Wagner says she hopes "many school districts have the sensitivity to omit genital exams." She believes that doing "mass genital exams" amounts to "truly abusing" all children, in order to find out whether "anyone else is abusing any of them."

Well of course there are no "mass genital" exams. Kentucky school physicals are done individually, and are subject to parental control. Any not done that way would fall outside the rules.

And will some conservative Christian pediatrician please call Ms. Wagner to explain that there are sound reasons for medical professionals to look at all parts of the body during a physical exam? And that the line on the state form doesn't mean nurses or doctors are going to give sixth grade girls a pelvic exam?

Meanwhile, I suggest the state apply for a foundation grant to study the impact of rumor and innuendo on public policy.

Mr. Hawpe's column appears Sundays and Wednesdays in The Forum.