

The First Amendment Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.



OPINION

Des Moines Sunday Register | SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 2023 | 1F

EDITORIAL THE REGISTER

Why have body cameras if we can't see police's entire recordings?

Video related to teenager's death shouldn't be kept confidential

The great promise of attaching cameras to law enforcement officers' uniforms is to give the public unvarnished recordings of high-pressure incidents, especially those where police kill a person.

Yes, the recordings can help in prosecuting suspects. They can aid investigators tasked with assessing police conduct. They can be tools for internal evaluations and training.

But for those other functions, it's still mostly only government employees who are able to watch the video. The government still curates and filters what ultimately reaches the public.

The public still can't know for sure whether the video or the official version of events has been sanitized in any way.

See EDITORIAL, Page 4F

MERRY ECCLES/USA TODAY NETWORK; GETTY IMAGES

OUR SCHOOLS NEED DIGITAL LITERACY



Your Turn
Michael Bugeja
Guest columnist

Without digital literacy, the emerging generation is likely to misinterpret the world and its place in it. Students will be disenfranchised not by inadequate state funding but by outdated lesson plans.

A 2021 Standard University study found that high school students are largely unable to detect fake news on the internet, citing "an urgent need for schools to integrate new tools and curriculum into classrooms that boost students' digital skills."

For more than a decade I have advocated for media and technology literacy. But now we are at a critical juncture as artificial intelligence merges with social media.

That promises to change everything, including who or what informs us — media or machine, reporter or chatbot. In the past, whoever owned the printing press had unrestrained free speech; that has morphed into whoever programs the algorithm.



GETTY IMAGES

See DIGITAL, Page 2F



Rachelle Chase
Columnist
USA TODAY NETWORK
Des Moines Register

Ottumwa schools must admit racism if they hope to tackle it

OTTUMWA — In December, when an investigative report by the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights made public the horrific racial harassment a Black student at an Ottumwa middle school endured for two years, I thought the school district would apologize and assure parents it took racism and racial harassment seriously.

It didn't.

When numerous media outlets in Iowa covered the Office of Civil Rights case and KTVO interviewed Alicia Long about her kids' experiences in Ottumwa

See CHASE, Page 4F

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Expect a cliff effect with SNAP legislation

As a volunteer with Save the Children Action Network, I can't stay silent about House File 3 and Senate Study Bill 1105, bills that drastically impact eligibility for SNAP and other public benefits.

I firmly believe that the definitions of "assets" within these bills including but not limited to: the value of a second vehicle and other personal property is going to create a giant cliff effect for working families like we have seen in the past with eligibility for child care assistance.

Not only would we be making SNAP benefits less accessible to those in need, we would also be discouraging those who do need the assistance from pursuing things like saving for emergencies and improving their quality of life. 286,100 Iowa residents, or 9% of the state population, benefit from this program; 42% of those are children. Looking at the risk of this major cliff effect, we must also consider the amount of children who will face food insecurity and continue living in poverty as they will no longer qualify for these benefits. We must keep children in mind with decisions at the Capitol. Let's ensure their health and well-being stay a priority.

— Jessi Balk, West Des Moines

'Choice' critics miss the big picture

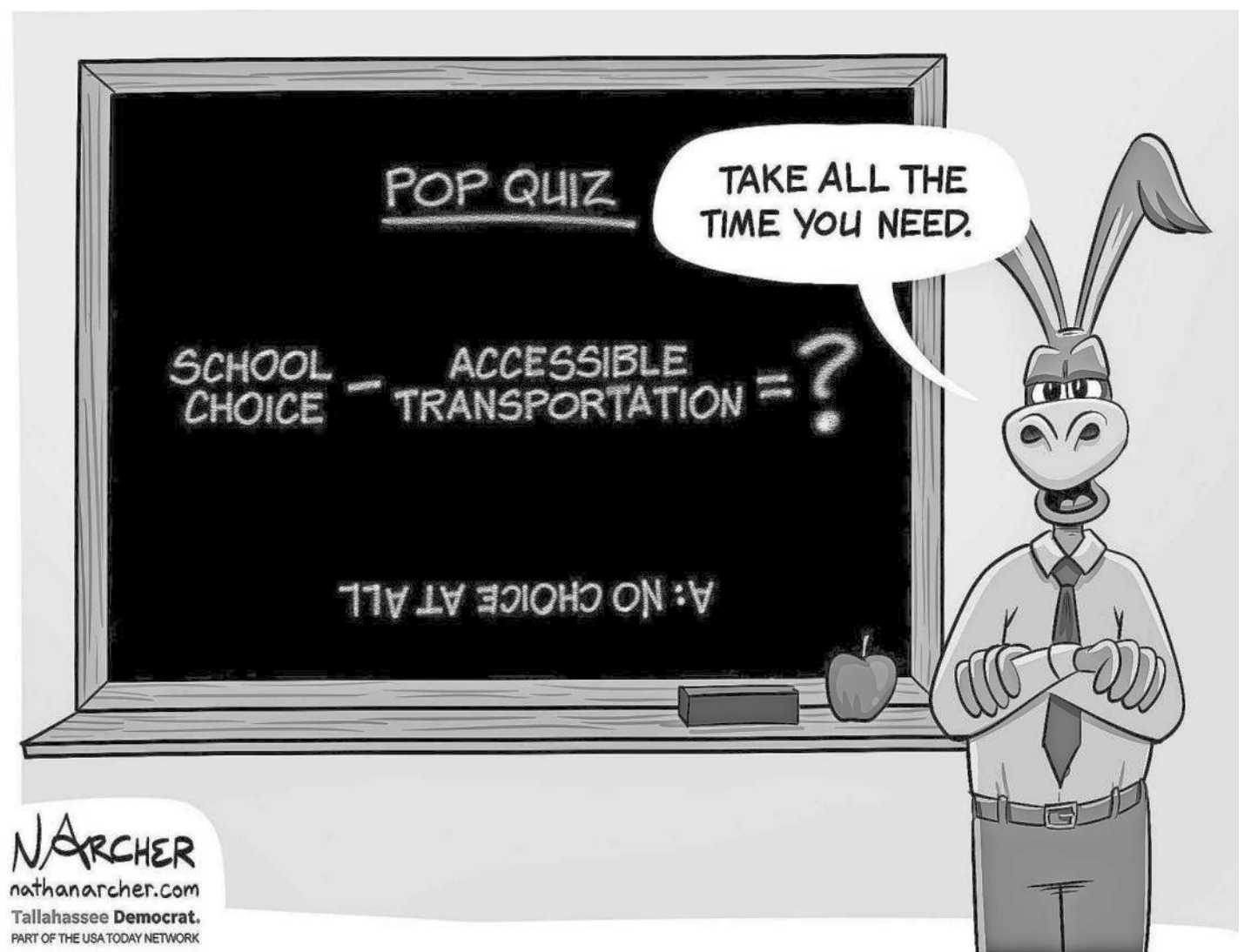
So, just to make sure I follow, since a third-grader who identifies as transgender maybe, possibly, hypothetically won't be able to change schools, the other over half a million Iowa public school students shouldn't have school choice? Makes perfect sense to me. To quote my favorite Vulcan, "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few."

— David Campbell, Pleasant Hill

Public schools offer unique educational settings

"Some kids may have ambitions and abilities that require a unique educational setting," said Gov. Kim Reynolds as she signed Iowa's school voucher law.

As a high school student at Des Moines Lincoln back in the 1970s I remember being amazed at the "unique educational setting" this large south-side school made available to every student. There were science choices with well supported labs (and staff), there was music (some of the best in the state at the time), art, drama, sports, community involvement opportunities. I remember as an active member of that school community being amazed at what a "unique education setting" every student had available to them. What happened to investing in that unique-



NATHAN ARCHER/USA TODAY NETWORK

ness for every Iowa student?

Early in my family's education decisions my parents chose our local parochial school system. My parents knew there were unique educational opportunities at the local public school but our religious practices at the time were important enough for my parents to choose, and self-pay for, a private school education. Kim Reynolds' voucher law changes that as well. Now, every Iowa taxpayer helps pay for the private education of a small percentage of Iowa students. Unique indeed!

— Matt Tapscott, Decorah

Medical advice is to support children, contrary to GOP bills

I am dismayed by the bills in the Iowa Legislature targeting gay and transgender children. As a retired pediatrician, I recognize that these laws go against medical recommendations for supporting children and families working through these issues. I would be curious to know where these legislators got their

medical and psychological training. As a citizen of the state, I would caution any businesses presently here or considering coming that this state may be hostile to many of their valuable employees.

— William Howard, Des Moines

Iowans in Congress should vote to raise debt limit

Iowa's four Republican congressional representatives have a singular opportunity to demonstrate whether their loyalty lies with the radical members of their caucus, or with the people of Iowa. Feckless Republicans are determined to take our economy to the brink of disaster and, perhaps, over the brink, by refusing to raise the debt ceiling, unless the Democrats agree to spending cuts.

Raising the debt ceiling does not involve new spending, but simply authorizes the government to pay bills already incurred. If we default, the economic recovery will screech to halt, and we could easily plunge into a severe recession, with rising interest rates on business

and personal loans, the closing of main street businesses, and massive layoffs, with their attendant human suffering.

For decades, raising the debt ceiling was usually a routine, bipartisan process. Republicans are suddenly concerned about the national debt, despite increasing the ceiling four times under Donald Trump. They made no serious attempts to reduce or slow spending; instead, they decreased revenue with huge tax cuts that primarily benefited corporations and the very wealthy. Now, in exchange for doing what responsible public servants should do anyway, they demand to have Social Security and Medicare laid on the chopping block.

If only five Republicans combine with Democrats, the House could raise the debt ceiling, and address other business. Iowa's House delegation could, and should, be the first four Republicans to renounce economic brinkmanship, and declare that they are not part of the extremist clique that dominates the Republican House caucus.

— Jim Whalen, Des Moines

Digital

Continued from Page 1F

Misleading messages

Ideally, journalism should be impartial, favoring no political party. That is often not the case. From Fox News to MSNBC, content often aligns with beliefs of the majority audience.

AllSides, a media bias website, evaluates news and opinion that lean to the left, center and right of contemporary politics.

As you might expect, The Atlantic earns a "left" rating. The National Review, a "right." The BBC, Christian Science Monitor, Reuters, Forbes and Wall Street Journal are among those that fall in the center.

But these outlets only play a small role when it comes to where most Americans get their news. Some 80% of us get information from cell phones and other digital devices, with 53% relying on social media.

Social media, in particular, is a font of untruth and conspiracy theories.

When we rely on tainted opinion, we develop confirmation bias, favoring news that validates what we already suspect about each other, especially in politics.

According to the Pew Research Cen-

ter, the majority of Democrats believe Republicans are more closed-minded than other Americans. About half of Republicans believe Democrats are more closed-minded, immoral, lazy and dishonest than other citizens.

Democracy, and our children, deserve better.

Literacy legislation

Iowa can take a cue from the state of New Jersey, which has just mandated media literacy in their public-school systems. Children at all grade levels will learn about information technology.

Lawmakers cite as a reason the continual lies about the 2020 election, the Jan. 6 insurrection, and non-stop misinformation on social media and the internet.

The New Jersey law passed with overwhelmingly bipartisan support.

As the Philadelphia Inquirer reports, "Advocates say the measure will help students who are bombarded with information from social media and news outlets learn how to discern whether the sources are credible."

Case in point: TikTok, a Chinese company, is the most popular application for American teens, with an amazing 95% using the application.

Iowa has banned TikTok from state government devices. It has one of the most invasive service terms in the busi-

ness, especially harmful to younger viewers. There are multiple ways to get around such a ban with a browser rather than an app. Banning is one thing; knowledge, another.

New Jersey legislators cite TikTok, along with other social media, as potential sources of misinformation. Students in the Garden State will learn how to evaluate content, access facts and critique commentary. Lesson plans explore economic, legal and ethical issues associated with news outlets and reports.

Other states are moving in the same direction.

In Illinois, public high schools must include a unit on media literacy. Colorado law requires schools to incorporate digital literacy into social studies standards.

The New York Times reports that high school students in Colorado Springs identify falsehoods and bias in the media where many get their information, training "a critical eye on the claims made by TikTok influencers and on YouTube videos."

Digital deception

Now, with ChatGPT and other artificial intelligence applications, Iowa school children will fall further behind counterparts in other states if we don't revise pedagogy.

Chatbots have the ability to create essays on demand, undermining Iowa Core Writing Standards. ChatGPT has even passed business, law and medical exams. Plagiarism and cheating will become more prevalent in Iowa schools.

But there are more troublesome aspects. Unlike search engines, which direct users to original material, bots simply take information from the web without attribution and feed it to users. That threatens the copyright of content creators and adds yet another layer of obfuscation as to fact and credibility.

Only digital literacy can combat that. Media Literacy Now, a grassroots movement, believes literacy "is critical to the health and well-being of America's children, as well as to their future participation in the civic and economic life of our democracy."

Keep one thing in mind as you evaluate whether Iowa needs digital literacy. High school and college students are or will soon become new voters. On what basis will they cast their votes (if they do at all) remaining misinformed?

Technology is evolving at breakneck speed. Iowa cannot be a bystander. It will take months, if not years, to create state-of-the-art curricula. Educators and legislators should act now.

Michael Bugeja is a distinguished professor of liberal arts and sciences at Iowa State University. These views are his own.

The Des Moines Register

Carol Hunter, executive editor

Lucas Grundmeier, opinion editor

Rachelle Chase, opinion columnist

Richard Doak, editorial board member

Rox Laird, editorial board member

How to contact us

Email: (515) 284-8142 or lgrundme@dmreg.com

Customer Service: Automated service 24/7 (toll-free) at (877) 424-0225. To talk with a customer service representative, hours are 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday to Friday and 7:30 a.m. to noon Sunday.

How to submit letters

All letters and guest opinions submitted to The Des Moines Register must be the original work of the author. All submissions may be edited for length, accuracy and clarity and may be published or distributed in print, electronic or other forms. Preference is given to letters that are 200 words or fewer.

Email: letters@dmreg.com. Include: Your complete name, home address and daytime telephone number for verification.

VOICES & COMMENTARY

OPPOSING VIEWS EDUCATION

Debunking 3 myths about Iowa's new school choice law

Students First Act helps families, public schools



Your Turn
Ellie Krasne
Guest columnist

Gov. Kim Reynolds signed into law Iowa's school choice bill, the Students First Act, on Jan. 24 and expanded school choice for all of Iowa's children and families.

As someone who grew up in rural Iowa and attended public elementary school, I was thrilled to see my home state make the right choice for Iowa's students. I live far away now, but many of my friends and my extended family live in Iowa. Prior to the bill passing, school choice debates heated up, and like with all policy debates, myths were being spread. Now that the bill passed and was signed into law, I want to debunk three harmful myths about Iowa's Students First Act.

The first myth is that the bill "destroys rural schools" because rural areas often don't have private schools, and rural schools could lose funding. First, this is in and of itself a contradiction. The rural areas either have private schools and risk losing students, or they have no private schools for students to attend. Fortunately, under Iowa's Students First Act, neither of these scenarios are likely. Iowa's school choice bill leaves money for public schools. The bill proposes \$7,630 of per-student funds for private schools, micro-schools, instructional materials, and online learning — many of which are accessible from all rural areas. And estimates suggest that public schools will keep about \$1,205 per pupil for each student who resides in their district but attends a private school. In sum, the Students First Act gives rural families more education freedom and ensures that rural schools will continue to receive taxpayer-funded financial support.

The second myth is that school choice benefits only the rich. The opposite is true; preventing low-income families from accessing the best schools is classist and unnecessarily holds low-income children back. Economically advantaged families often already live in high-performing school districts and likely can afford private schools. Iowa's school choice bill addresses this disparity by targeting lower-income families. In the first year, the plan targets families whose income does not exceed 300% of the federal poverty line. This would include, for example, a family of three whose total household income is \$69,000 or below — hardly the trappings of a policy that benefits only the rich.

Similar programs have worked well in other parts of the country. In Florida, the average household income of families using the state's largest private school choice program is \$37,730 per year. Iowans should applaud a program that expands opportunity for all Iowa's kids, irrespective of their ZIP code or

parents' income.

School choice is available to all, which leads to the last and ugliest myth: that school choice foments discrimination and nefariously uses public money for religious activities.

First, federal law forbids private schools from engaging in racial discrimination. Additionally, a Google search of Iowa private schools reveals that one of Iowa's largest private schools has a population of 25% minority students, offers ESL classes, and has generous scholarship programs and tuition discounts. This is hardly an example of a racially and ethnically monolith, elitist private school.

Moreover, Iowa's Latino population has grown by 161% in the past 20 years. Meanwhile, a 2015 EdChoice study shows that support for school choice is higher among Latinos than the national average. The Students First Act supports educational freedom for families of all ethnic groups and skin colors.

Anecdotally, my Iowa public elementary school had no racial, ethnic, or religious minorities, but my private high school had many. At this point, it bears mentioning that I'm an adopted Jew and would never support a piece of legislation that didn't help children from all walks of life. This brings me to part two of the school choice discrimination myth: that school choice conflicts with the principle of separation of church and state.

The Supreme Court has long held that school vouchers are consistent with the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, which both protects the free exercise of religion and prohibits the government from establishing a state religion. In *Zelman vs. Harris* (2002), the Court upheld an Ohio voucher program that provided benefits directly to individuals, allowing them to choose from schools that are public or private, secular or religious. The court reasoned that including religious schools, among others, does not amount to an unconstitutional "establishment of religion." More recently, in *Carson v. Makin* (2021), the court held that a Maine voucher program, which prohibited religious schools from accessing state funds, discriminated against religion in violation of the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause. In short, the Court has been clear that under the First Amendment, states are not only permitted to include religious schools in their voucher programs, they are, in fact, constitutionally required to allow parents the choice of a religious school.

The bottom line: School choice does not violate the separation of church and state. Iowa's school choice bill lets parents use their hard-earned tax dollars to fund education that works best for their children.

I live in Paris, France, now, and I heard the good news that the bill was quickly signed into law. Even from all the way across the world, I couldn't be prouder to see my home state ensuring that all children — black, white, poor, rich, urban, and rural — have access to the best education possible.

Ellie Krasne is a visiting fellow at Independent Women's Forum.

This is what's really happening at public schools

Ugly attacks on Iowans are the real problem



Your Turn
Matt Pries
Guest columnist

What is happening in public schools that makes them and their work such a topic of debate?

That was the question posed to me recently. The short answer could be "nothing." There's nothing happening in public schools that is causing all this. But that simplifies things too much.

I've given a good deal of thought to this. What follows is my answer. But it's not just related to the voucher debate. It's related to the constant attack on public schools in our state. I come from a family of teachers. I am friends with many people who work in public schools. I cannot sit quietly by when our calling ... when our life's work ... when schools and people we hold dear are being hit with such a barrage of hurtful legislation and rhetoric.

So here you go. Here's what is happening.

The population is growing more diverse, even in rural parts of our state. Our public schools reflect that diversity. Factors such as religion, ethnicity, gender, race, language, giftedness, disabilities (learning, behavioral, and physical), family make-up, socioeconomic status, access to resources, access to preschool, responsibilities at home, homelessness, the need to work, history with mental health, violence in or out of the home, drugs, alcohol, and on and on ...

Public schools are doing everything they can to be student-ready. Ready to meet the needs of all students in the best way possible.

And if that's still too simple, let's dig in ...

No matter how you slice it, public schools have to be ready for just about anything. I've seen it. I've seen the kid who fails because he's bored, but rises because a teacher realizes it and gets him into the TAG program. I've seen the blind, deaf, and mute student learn to communicate because of the love of teachers and associates. I've seen the patience of teachers who work with kids who throw excrement on the walls. I've seen the persistence of a teacher who stays late and comes early to help ensure a student with deficient writing skills meets the standard to pass.

I've seen counselors work tirelessly with at-risk kids on the verge of dropping out — and then hug them when they walk across the stage, diploma in hand. I've seen the LGBTQ+ transfer student who was bullied at a previous school thrive in a new place because they felt safe. I've seen the school-to-work program for special ed students where they get on-the-job training for work they continue after graduation. I've seen the kid who hadn't read a single book cover-to-cover because he

Public schools aren't the problem. The teachers and staff aren't the problem. The students aren't the problem. The problem is the people coming after them.

didn't think he could read turn into a kid who reads four books in a month.

Yes ... I've seen many kids like that in my nearly 30 years teaching; most will never step foot in a private school because the private school won't take them — even if they do have that shiny \$7,600 cash gift from our legislature to help offset tuition. Because those private schools don't have to do what public schools have to do: be student-ready — for all kinds of kids from all walks of life.

Here's the thing: Being student-ready has gotten harder. An insidious agenda has made it harder. For schools to do their work, they need financial support. Generally, folks agree a 4% increase in aid each year would be close. In the past 10 years, the average has been around 2%. And what has happened in that time? Public schools have continually been tasked with doing more with less. Those in power have played the long game: Don't fund schools at the level needed. Schools will be negatively impacted. Schools won't perform as well. People will be frustrated.

Eventually, they can shift money to private schools, while they continue to underfund public schools under the guise of giving people more choice. Case in point? Last month, they haughtily pointed out the financial strength of our state allowing them to fund the voucher bill. Then they turned around and said they couldn't afford to give more than 2% to 3% to public schools because they need to be careful with the budget.

And as, ahem, sinister as that is, it's not the only thing that has led to this. The other issue is some people don't like everything our schools have to be ready for. Our schools don't look like them. Don't sound like them. Don't act like them. Don't do learning the way they think learning should be done. So instead of realizing our schools are a picture of the world where teachers and staff are doing the best they can to help all kids be ready for the world? They go after the school — which is really their way of going after the world. Because the world doesn't look like them. Doesn't sound like them. Doesn't act like them. Doesn't do life the way they think life should be done. But it's hard to go after the world.

Instead, they go after something where they feel they have power to do it. Armed with a false narrative filled with more crap than a litter box and promoted by organizations and people with money to spread it. And those organizations and people will keep trying to bring down public schools — and the towns and people that depend on them — until they can sit on top of the heap smiling down at white-washed history and homogeneity while they count their stacks of money.

I hope it's not too late when people finally realize how ugly this whole thing is. How unaligned it is with the Christian values so many espouse. Heaven is a wonderful place — filled with glory and grace. Heaven isn't homogeneous. Neither are public schools. Jesus loves the little children — all the children of the world. Public schools are called to do the same.

Public schools aren't the problem. The teachers and staff aren't the problem.

The students aren't the problem. The problem is the people coming after them.

Matthew Pries is a literacy interventionist at Waukee High School.



Children from various private schools sit in front of the signing table for the Students First Act in the rotunda of the Iowa State Capitol Building on Jan. 24.

MARGARET KISP/PT/REGISTER



Becky Smith, executive director of Iowa Safe Schools, holds a transgender flag near the signing ceremony for House File 2416, prohibiting transgender women and girls from competing in female sports offered by Iowa schools, colleges and universities, on March 3, 2022, in the rotunda of the Iowa State Capitol in Des Moines.

KELSEY KREMER/PT/REGISTER

Editorial

Continued from Page 1F

City's lawyers block release of video in teen's death

This is the very state of affairs to date in the case of a deadly shooting of a 16-year-old boy by Des Moines police officers early on Dec. 26. Because a minor was involved, the city, citing Iowa law, has declined to release video recordings. The final public word on the topic may be a 14-page written report from the state attorney general's office — a report focused on the narrow question of whether the shooting was criminal, leaving unanswered even more relevant questions about prudence and procedure. More transparency could either build trust in police or illuminate problems that might be fixable. Withholding the video from public scrutiny means neither of those things can happen.

The attorney general's report says the teenager's stepfather called 911 because the boy had a gun. After officers arrived, he refused instructions for over four minutes to drop the firearm and raised it above his waist three times. Three officers fired 14 shots, the report said.

The argument for releasing all video of the incident applies regardless of how anybody feels about the Des Moines Police Department, or the Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation, which investigated the shooting, or the office of Attorney General Brenna Bird, which determined the officers' gunfire was legally justified. Those inclined to distrust those agencies obviously want unfiltered evidence. Those inclined to find the agencies credible also should have no issue with releasing the video, since they believe it will bear out the official accounts. (The January change in party

control of the attorney general's office from Democrat Tom Miller to Bird, a Republican, is irrelevant to this analysis; the report on the Des Moines shooting was prepared by Scott Brown, a long-time assistant attorney general, and it reads similarly to his report on a Linn County shooting last fall, when Miller was his boss.)

After Tyre Nichols' death, video was released quickly

Body camera recordings are in the public consciousness after the death of 29-year-old Tyre Nichols on Jan. 10 after a horrific beating at the hands of Memphis, Tennessee, police. Five police officers were fired and charged with murder, accused of fatally beating Nichols on Jan. 7. At least five other emergency workers have been disciplined. Where investigations of alleged police misconduct often stretch on in near-total secrecy for months, this case was notable for the speed with which authorities arrested the officers and made the recordings available to the public.

Many advocates urged people not to seek out or view the graphic attack on Nichols, saying he should instead be remembered as a father and a skateboarder (who happened to live in Des Moines years ago). That's entirely rational. But individuals choosing whether to watch is far different from the government choosing we cannot.

Some accommodations for privacy and compassion are appropriate. It's sensible to redact certain faces from recordings, such as juveniles' and bystanders'. Families of victims should be afforded the opportunity to view recordings before public release, much like the standard practice of notifying families before publicly announcing the names of people involved in violent acts and traffic crashes.

But the default position should be expedient and complete release of all available recordings of an incident. Edited excerpts are barely superior to having just the word of investigators. Delays might in rare instances be merited to protect the integrity of investigations and prosecutions, and seeing video months or even years after the fact is better than never seeing it. But long delays risk becoming quiet denials if the vigilance of those seeking video ever flags.

Confidentiality for juveniles shouldn't cut off public review of their deaths

Des Moines police say they were prepared, until receiving advice from legal counsel, to release some of the video involving the Dec. 26 shooting. And that brings us to section 232.149 of the Iowa Code, which until 2016 said that many "records and files of a criminal or juvenile justice agency ... concerning a child involved in a delinquent act" were presumptively available to the public. A law passed that year made those records presumptively confidential.

The law, uncontroversial at the time, makes sense in light of what we continue to learn about children's developing brains and the consequences of allowing youthful mistakes to stick to them as adults. But it would be a grave disservice if the law categorically puts fatal police encounters with children into the realm of "trust us that we handled this right."

Balancing the privacy rights of children with the demands of transparency is not easy. But a blanket "no" isn't balancing at all. The courts or lawmakers may have to step in to ensure the greatest possible accountability in the most tragic of circumstances.

Kristen Ziman, a former police chief

The purpose of the cameras is to "strengthen investigations and promote positive community relations and support." The community's evaluation of police should be aided by the evidence body cameras capture, especially when a child dies.

in Aurora, Illinois, had it right last month when she told the New York Times, "I don't think the public is going to tolerate any more of us saying, 'This is under investigation and we'll look at it and we'll let you know what we decide.'" Indeed, a Washington Post-ABC News poll conducted Jan. 27 to Feb. 1 indicated that Americans' confidence that police are adequately trained to avoid using excessive force dipped after the revelations about Nichols' death, the Post reported.

The policy issued by the Des Moines Police Department over five years ago when it began issuing body cameras is explicit: The purpose of the cameras is to "strengthen investigations and promote positive community relations and support." The community's evaluation of police should be aided by the evidence body cameras capture, especially when a child dies.

— Lucas Grundmeier, on behalf of the Register editorial board

Chase

Continued from Page 1F

schools, I thought the school district would apologize and assure parents it took racism and racial harassment seriously.

It didn't.

Instead, Superintendent Michael McGrory's "Statement From Ottumwa Schools" said the district was working with the Office of Civil Rights and emphasized the district would "continue to focus on equity for every student."

Even the Ottumwa Courier editorial board deemed that response inadequate. Its editorial, "Enough with the branding; address racism," included a call to action for the district and a scathing rebuke of McGrory's statement, stating it "skirted the harsh realities of what happened" and was "devoid of any remorse or expression of horror at what has occurred on his watch."

The case received national coverage, including a mention in a January New York Times story on the nationwide doubling of discrimination cases — most "based on disability, race and sex" — this past fiscal year when compared to the previous year.

On Jan. 16, KTVO posted an update and mentioned the district's equity meeting, inviting parents and community members to attend.

I thought surely all this would put the problems front and center at the Jan. 24 equity meeting at Ottumwa's Liberty Elementary School, with detailed discussion of the resolution agreement with the federal government. Surely racism would be acknowledged as a potential issue and discussions would include how it could be addressed going forward.

Nope.

The OCR case was barely mentioned until parent Gerald Baugh brought it up nearly an hour and a half into the meeting, along with possible solutions.

Nor was it included in the sampling of data that was shared at the meeting. About 2,200 responses were obtained for questions such as, "How much respect do students in your school show you?" and, "How connected do you feel to the adults at your school?" Maria Lantz, director of curriculum and instruction and equity coordinator, led the meeting and said that, while the district had language data, race was an optional question. The field wasn't included in creating the report.

If responses cannot be broken down by race or questions related to racial acceptance or discrimination are excluded, doesn't that show an unwillingness to explore, let alone admit, that racism or racial bias is a problem?

Additionally, Lantz said that this data would be used to make strong strategic decisions, as well as to provide input into a districtwide equity audit, which groups of attendees at the meeting discussed to determine whether or not all schools in the district had successfully addressed the items in the equity categories. The categories included school



Parent Gerald Baugh stands near Liberty Elementary School sign in Ottumwa. He said he wants to be involved in solutions for schools. RACHELLE CHASE/THE REGISTER

organization and administration, school climate and environment, and assessment and placement. This ongoing equity audit would be used to create an equity plan.

Again, if the data doesn't include how Black children experience these issues and explore the extent to which racism or bias affects these children, how is it going to be addressed in an equity plan? Here are some ideas:

Parent and community member involvement is crucial

Though attendees seemed to be mostly district or school personnel, there were a handful of parents and community members, of whom four (in addition to me) were Black.

Gerald Baugh, whose daughter attends school in Ottumwa, is a retired teacher with a bachelor's degree in legal science. When he saw the article about the harassment in the paper, he wanted to become involved. Baugh doesn't want Black and brown kids to be terrorized. He wants everyone to realize there are legal consequences if it is allowed. For example, on weekly teacher professional development days, he suggested, "legal statutes" could be sent to teachers letting them know that permitting such abuse is a violation of a student's civil rights.

"Not only does it pertain to Black and brown, but now we've got kids that want to be addressed by a pronoun," he added. "So there again, you know, we need to let people know that it's not OK." To increase teacher accountability, Baugh also wants parents to be able to sit in on classes — which may help teachers take action if they know inaction may land them on the news.

Long's KTVO interview is not the first time she's spoken out about issues important to her. For years, she's been an advocate for change where it's needed and a regular at district meetings, school board meetings, and many school meetings. "I think we need to be able to realize the only way to make changes and make people feel like

they're being heard is to include them," she said. One of the things she recommended was changing the equity meeting time to early evening so more parents could attend (Lantz agreed and proposed a new meeting time of 5 p.m.), plus sharing the work the district is doing with the community, which might motivate people to participate.

Though numerous parents have stated that their children have experienced racism or bias, getting them to come forward has been problematic. After George Floyd's murder in 2020, Lorraine Uehling Techel created Ottumwa's Racial Justice. She had protested Floyd's murder for weeks. An education subcommittee of that group was formed to address issues facing Black students and other students of color, such as proficiency gaps, the disparity in suspensions and expulsions, lack of equitable access to advanced placement classes, and lack of representation in staff, teachers and curriculum — issues that continue to be problems.

Long, Barb Hanson — who has since left Ottumwa and co-founded Shared Existence, LLC — and I were among the subcommittee's original members.

We were told it might be difficult to recruit parents to participate, as many were afraid to do so or to share their experiences because they feared making things worse for their child or were discouraged by repeated complaints that were ignored. The Black student in the Office of Civil Rights report shared similar feelings, choosing to remain silent as the racial slurs were hurled more frequently.

All the more reason for the district to reach out to these parents, gain their trust, and invite them to participate. Long suggested that text message reminders be sent to all parents. "I understand that we don't want it to be overwhelming," she said. "But clearly, we have not been getting an overwhelming response (from parents) at this time. So why not just put it out there to give us an opportunity to have more inclusion?"

Both Long and Baugh are committed to contributing in future equity meet-

ings and school board meetings. Additionally, Baugh plans to correspond with Lantz in the coming days to address the failure to protect Black middle schoolers from ongoing racial harassment. Though both have concerns, they are hopeful.

There are reasons to be hopeful

Other than implementing successful solutions for language translation in Ottumwa schools, all attendees agreed that the other categories on the equity audit needed work districtwide. Quick wins that could be implemented now, such as every building completing its own equity audit to determine next steps, were identified. Stephanie Brownlee, the district's communication specialist, suggested posting content on school walls to make students feel included, including content that celebrated Black History Month, which led to discussions of celebrating Black students and community members.

Lantz said the district is "building out a framework using the teaching tolerance standards in social justice around identity, diversity, justice and action and advocacy" on which teachers will be trained and students will be required to participate. Additionally, Lantz told me that the district is working with Cedar Rapids nonprofit Four Oaks to train staff on "the restorative piece," where students who have caused harm take responsibility for their actions, engage in conversation where they have caused harm, and seek to repair the harm.

These last two sound especially promising. But the fact that neither the federal case nor racism or racial bias was included in discussion of the Teaching Tolerance principles at another equity meeting at Evans Middle School on Jan. 26 was concerning. None of those topics was included in the restorative discussion, either, just as the racial slurs weren't addressed in the restorative circle formed to address the racism experienced by the Black student in the publicized racial harassment case.

Which, once again, raises the question of how racism or bias can be addressed if it can't be included, and stresses the importance of Black and other parents and students of color having a voice in the implementation of these initiatives. The district's schedule of equity meetings and school board meetings, as well as contact information, is on the district website.

"I have hope that in one year, three years, that we will slowly begin to see progress being made. However, I feel like we won't have real progress without more community involvement," Long said, referring to everything discussed at the meeting. "And we hope that some of the things that we talked about can be implemented and more people choose to come and be involved, to see the changes that we as a community would like to see."

Rachelle Chase is an author and an opinion columnist at the Des Moines Register. Follow Rachelle at facebook.com/rachelle.chase.author.