

May 17, 2010

### **LACK OF SHARED VISION HAS MADE GEORGIA'S PUBLIC EDUCATION A BARREN WASTELAND**

Kathy Cox has resigned as State School Superintendent to take a new job in Washington. I have no way of knowing who will win the job this fall, but I do know that what public education lacks more than dollars is a strong and effective advocate.

No one – not Cox, not the State Board of Education, not the Georgia School Board Association, not the Georgia Association of Educators and the Professional Association of Georgia Educators, not the Georgia School Superintendents Association, not the charter school groups, not the city and county school boards, not the governor, not the General Assembly — seems able to lay out a clear vision of the future of public education in the State of Georgia.

Do you know what that vision is? Do your neighbors? The clerk in the grocery store? The sheriff's deputy? The guy that runs the diner? The choir director? They should. They — and you — provide the tax dollars that help fund public education. That should be the role of the state school superintendent. Tell all the parties where we are going and then help us get there. Be in charge.

Of course, all those involved in public education will say they want Georgia's schools to be the finest in the nation and that we are making progress in that regard. But like the blind groping the elephant, they all have a different — and many times conflicting — view of how to get there. There doesn't seem to be a common determination among the players of what is best for teachers.

To wit: I was promised by Earl Ehrhart (R-Cobb), then chairman of the House Rules Committee that the 2010 Legislature would restore the money owed nationally-certified teachers, including my son-in-law, that had been legally obligated by the state. However, he said if the Professional Association of Georgia Educators sued the state, legislators would not go along until the courts resolve the matter.

PAGE claims the legislators should not have used their lawsuit as an excuse of not taking action on the matter of restoring the funds. PAGE says, "A few claimed that our lawsuit 'tied their hands.' There is no legal justification we can find for that statement and their hands are not tied in any way, in our view."

In the meantime, my son-in-law remains a pawn in a fight between two powerful forces and unable to get the money rightfully owed him.

This brings me to the legislature. I am told on good authority that as many as 90 percent of the bills introduced in the General Assembly each year have not been vetted by the State Department of Education . If that is true and I have every reason to believe it is, that is unconscionable. Much of the legislation is a sop to somebody back home and no more a part of the big picture of public education than butter is to a butter fly. The new school superintendent needs to put a stop to that.

A number of legislators introducing these bills don't send their children to public schools, which I find disturbing. Perhaps what they are proposing to do with our tax dollars makes all the sense in the world, but wouldn't you like to know whether or not they and their families are going to be impacted by their decisions, too? I would.

In the midst of all the chaos, the teachers that remain standing in this barren wasteland keep on teaching. Their morale is shot and they bring home less money every year. (Somehow, while cutting teachers' pay nobody ever cuts teachers' expenses.) They wonder when and how and where the next shoe is going to drop on them, but they know also that they are making a difference in young lives. That is what sustains them.

I used to think nobody cared about public education in Georgia. Now, I think a lot of people do, they just refuse to get their disparate acts together. Until we learn to speak with one voice on public education in Georgia and not some narrow special interest portion of it, ours will continue to be a barren educational wasteland.

That is Job One for the next state school superintendent.