Editorial: Republicans are failing Americans

Publisher's note: ***This editorial is from the Oct. 1, 2013, Washington Post.***

Americans' respect for their Congress has, sad to say, diminished in recent years. But citizens still expect a minimal level of competence and responsibility: Pay the bills and try not to embarrass us in front of the world.

By those minimal standards, this Congress is failing. More specifically, the Republican leaders of the House of Representatives are failing. They should fulfill their basic duties to the American people or make way for legislators who will.

Congress should fulfill its basic duties or make way for legislators who will.

We don't come to that view as rabid partisans. On many of the issues stalemating Washington, we find plenty of blame to go around. We've criticized President Obama's reluctance to pursue entitlement reform. The last time the country reached the debt ceiling, we urged both sides to compromise on revenue and spending in the interest of long-term fiscal soundness.

This time, fiscal responsibility isn't even a topic. Instead, Republicans have shut much of the government in what they had to know was a doomed effort to derail the Affordable Care Act. That law, in case you've forgotten in the torrent of propaganda, is hardly revolutionary. It is an effort to extend health insurance to some of the 40 million or so people in this country who have none. It acts through the existing private-insurance market. Republicans tried to block its passage and failed; they hoped to have it declared unconstitutional and failed; and they did their best to toss

Obama out of the White House after one term in order to strangle it in its cradle, and they failed again.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Tough teachers can motivate students

By Joanne Lipman, Wall Street Journal

I had a teacher once who called his students “idiots” when they screwed up. He was our orchestra conductor, a fierce Ukrainian immigrant named Jerry Kupchynsky, and when someone played out of tune, he would stop the entire group to yell, “Who eez deaf in first violins!?” He made us rehearse until our fingers almost bled. He corrected our wayward hands and arms by poking at us with a pencil.

Today, he’d be fired. But when he died a few years ago, he was celebrated: Forty years’ worth of former students and colleagues flew back to my New Jersey hometown from every corner of the country, old instruments in tow, to play a concert in his memory. I was among them, toting my long-neglected viola. When the curtain rose on our concert that day, we had formed a symphony orchestra the size of the New York Philharmonic.

I was stunned by the outpouring for the gruff old teacher we knew as Mr. K. But I was equally struck by the success of his former students. Some were musicians, but most had distinguished themselves in other fields, like law, academia and medicine. Research tells us that there is a positive correlation between music education and academic achievement.

But that alone didn’t explain the belated surge of gratitude for a teacher who basically tortured us through adolescence.

We’re in the midst of a national wave of self-recrimination over the U.S. education system. Every day there is hand-wringing over our students falling behind the rest of the world. Fifteen-year-olds in the U.S. trail students in 12 other nations in science and 17 in math, bested by their counterparts not just in Asia but in Finland, Estonia and the Netherlands, too. An entire industry of books and consultants has grown up that capitalizes on our collective fear that American education is inadequate and asks what American educators are doing wrong.

I would ask a different question. What did Mr. K do right? What can we learn from a teacher whose methods fly in the face of everything we think we know about education today, but who was undeniably effective?

Read the whole story

Opinion: Calif. needs to address truancy

By Arne Duncan and Kamala Harris

Millions of desks sit empty in elementary school classrooms because of truancy each year, costing schools billions of dollars, wasting public resources and squandering one of the country’s most precious resources: its young people.

We tend to think of truancy as something that starts in junior high or high school, but nationwide, about 1 in 10

kindergarten and first-grade students miss a month of school each year due to absences. In California, you could fill Staples Center in Los Angeles 13 times over with the 250,000 students who missed 18 days or more last year. About 1 million elementary school students in the state were truant – defined in California as three or more unexcused absences or tardies – during the 2012-13 school year.

Not surprisingly, students with high rates of unexcused absences fall behind. And teachers at schools with high truancy rates find themselves forced to teach the same material again and again.

Chronic absenteeism is especially damaging to disadvantaged students, who are already at higher risk of falling behind their peers academically. Missing school widens achievement gaps, and catching up can be difficult. Students who are truant in elementary school are more likely to be truant in middle and high school, when truancy is closely linked to an increased chance of a child dropping out.

Dropouts cost states billions in incarceration, lost productivity and lost tax revenues. Studies project that increasing graduation rates by just 10 percentage points would lead to as many as 3,000 fewer murders and nearly 175,000 fewer aggravated assaults nationwide.

The solution to truancy? It’s straightforward: Hold accountable everyone who bears responsibility for getting kids to school.

School districts already have the tools, as well as the legal responsibility, to intervene when a child is truant. And it’s clear that intervention helps. Truant elementary students whose attendance improves are half as likely to drop out in high school compared with students whose truancy continues or worsens.

School districts have long taken daily attendance, but they

need to use the information they gather to create an early warning system that identifies children who are frequently absent. School administrators should contact guardians immediately when a child is truant and insist on a meeting to find solutions.

As needed, schools should connect families with social services, public health and community resources to address underlying problems. Parents must be held accountable, and law enforcement should support interventions that educate and bolster struggling students and parents. The business community should be enlisted to help create incentives to improve attendance, like rewards for schools and families with improved attendance.

California is one of only four states (along with New York, Colorado and Illinois) that does not collect individual student attendance data at the state level. That should change. These data are crucial for states to hold schools and districts accountable. Every state needs systems to track truancy, connect attendance to academic achievement and, where there are warning signs, intervene swiftly.

At the federal level, the Department of Education has invested in the revitalization of communities through its Promise Neighborhoods program, and improving attendance has been a core strategy for some grantees. One of the department's largest investments in innovation is helping to expand a national program for at-risk students, which has improving attendance among its key goals. Other grants support school counselors and the creation of more positive school climates. And low-performing schools receiving federal funds to turn themselves around have commonly put resources toward reducing chronic absenteeism. All of these approaches can serve as models if they prove successful.

On Monday, a diverse group of local, state and federal leaders met in Los Angeles to discuss a new report by the California

Department of Justice, “In School and on Track.” It can be found online and will be updated annually to measure and compare the progress of California’s counties and school districts.

The report provides a window into truancy’s toll on the nation’s economy, public safety and children. If state and federal leaders work together – alongside schools and parents – we can stop this waste of potential and get our children to class on time, every day. The price we pay otherwise is just too high.

Arne Duncan is U.S. Secretary of Education. Kamala Harris is attorney general of California.

Opinion: Expanding fracking in Calif. is bad policy

By Michael Brune and Kathryn Phillips

By signing Senate Bill 4, a severely compromised fracking bill, Gov. Jerry Brown has shown a lack of optimism and confidence in California’s future at a time when the state has its greatest chance – and need – to move beyond oil and gas to clean energy. This is far less than we expect from a governor with the potential to be a visionary environmental leader.

In May, when questioned about fracking at a news conference, Brown said: “I have to balance my strong commitment to deal with climate change and renewable energy with what could be a fabulous economic opportunity.” The governor shouldn’t be reducing his commitment to fight climate change, he should reinforce it by replacing fossil fuels with clean energy. The

true economic opportunity for California is in solar and wind, and in leading the nation and the world in demonstrating that containing climate disruption is an economic opportunity.



More than 43,000 Californians are employed in the solar-energy industry alone. One of the most successful new businesses in the state builds electric cars, wind energy is growing throughout the state, and our largest, most car-dependent city has set new standards for investment in clean public transit and renewable energy.

Fracking and well stimulation are the so-called “advanced” technologies that inject harsh chemicals and acids deep into the ground to break up and dissolve rock and sand to free hard-to-reach oil and gas deposits. Although SB4 began as a measure to require better regulation and greater disclosure about fracking, by the time the Legislature passed the bill it had been weakened by amendments that the governor negotiated to dampen oil industry opposition.

An increase in fracking and well stimulation for oil in California will make us more dependent on the fuels that create climate disruption. It will also expand an industrial, polluting drilling process to thousands of square miles of Southern and Central California. By conservative estimates, extracting the estimated 15 billion barrels of oil contained within the Monterey shale formation would result in more than 6 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide pollution.

To put that in perspective, consider that the new federal fuel-economy rules for light-duty vehicles – standards inspired by California’s own ground-breaking efforts – are expected to save Americans 12 billion barrels of oil by 2025 and a corresponding reduction in carbon pollution. Opening up the Monterey shale to fracking would more than erase any gains realized from those national fuel-economy standards.

Carbon pollution is not the only problem with fracking and well stimulation, either. A single well typically requires anywhere from 1 million to 5 million gallons of water mixed with harsh chemicals and acids. At some point, much – though not all – of that fluid returns to the surface. But what once was clear water is so hopelessly polluted with chemicals that the industry's response is to inject it into waste wells, where it can never again be used to water crops, serve as drinking water or flow in streams.

In other states, fracking has been responsible for extreme pollution of groundwater and surface water, air pollution and even earthquakes.

Given these negatives, are fracking and well stimulation to extract more oil really the best path for California's economy and environment?

Californians deserve the opportunity to consider this question before our state allows the expansion of fracking. If our labor, water and capital investment are going to be spent on creating more oil at the expense of public health and the environment, what alternatives must we forgo? As an economist would ask, what are the opportunity costs of fracking?

The opportunity costs include greater investment and a faster transition to cleaner fuels and renewable energy. They include jobs that contribute to society and don't come with high-risk exposure to cancer-causing chemicals. By investing our energy and human capital in more oil extraction, we give up opportunities to provide future generations with clean air, clean water and a shot at inheriting a world not devastated by climate change.

Californians are an optimistic, innovative people. The nation and the world look to our state for a vision of the future. But we can't build an economy of the future with fuels from the past. Our political leaders owe us the chance to move

beyond fossil fuels and toward the clean energy that will power that future. That's why it's time for the Legislature and the governor to place a moratorium on fracking.

Michael Brune is the executive director of the Sierra Club. Kathryn Phillips is director of Sierra Club California.

Opinion: Water war brewing in California

By Dan Walters, Sacramento Bee

There is simply nothing more important to California's future than an adequate and dependable supply of clean water.

Accordingly, there is simply nothing more complex than its water politics, as we are beginning to see as Gov. Jerry Brown, legislators and water stakeholders attempt to write a 2014 bond issue.



Dan Walters

The Legislature and Brown's predecessor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, wrote an $11.1 billion water bond issue four years ago as an adjunct to building an "alternative conveyance" for water through, around or under the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

However, placing the bond issue before voters was postponed twice due to fears that it would be rejected due to its size and bits of pork that had nothing to do with water supply. It’s scheduled for the 2014 ballot, but that version is likely to be abandoned.

Read the whole story

Opinion: U.S. bickering is costing it its greatness

By Thomas L. Friedman, New York Times

Countries that don’t plan for the future tend not to do well there.

When you watch the reckless behavior of the Tea Party-driven Republicans in Congress today, you can’t help but fear that we’ll be one of those. What makes it all the more frustrating is that in so many ways we have the wind at our back, if only we’d pull together to take advantage of it.



Thomas L. Friedman

In a world that rewards imagination, we have an incredible melting pot of immigrants that constantly blends together new

ideas from technology to commerce to the arts. In a world where secure, clean energy is a huge asset, our investments in efficiency and discoveries of natural gas, if properly exploited, have the potential to pull manufacturing back to America from all corners of the globe. In a world where the big divide is no longer between developed and developing countries but rather between high-imagination-enabling countries and low-imagination-enabling countries, we remain the highest-imagination-enabling country in the world – and we have the innovative companies, start-ups and venture capitalists to prove it. In a world where so many countries are struggling with diversity, we do so as well, but at least we've reached a point where we could twice elect a black man for president, whose middle name is Hussein, who defeated a woman in his own party and then four years later a Mormon from the other. No one else does that.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Higher ed needs to make changes now

By Byron P. White

Somewhere between our group's discussion of three-year bachelor's degrees and its deliberation over the value of general-education courses, the sensation swept over me: I've seen this before—or at least something close to it. Déjà vu.

The people engaged in the conversation were different this time. They were members of Cleveland State University's senior leadership team. We had gathered for President Ronald Berkman's annual two-day fall retreat, which began with an

overview of the forces that are driving the need for urgent change in higher education.

Noting our industry's notorious reputation for being stuck in its ways, President Berkman baited his vice presidents and deans: "Do we really have an appetite for change?" he asked. Thus began a vigorous dialogue among my colleagues in which we delved into all manner of institutional innovation.

The scene reminded me of similar sessions at another time, in another place, concerning urgent change in another "mature" industry. That industry was the newspaper business. I began my professional career in 1984 as a newspaper reporter, and after about 10 years, I had ascended to the management ranks of the Chicago Tribune. I recall countless conversations around that time with senior staff and peers at national conferences where we would discuss the powerful forces threatening the industry and how we desperately needed to respond.

We never really did, at least not sufficiently enough to stem the onslaught of technological advancements, disruption of business models, and shifting consumer preferences that have since conspired to pretty much dismantle newspapers as we knew them. Tribune, parent company of my beloved Chicago paper, filed for bankruptcy a few years ago. In my current home, Cleveland, the Plain Dealer recently ceased home delivery on certain days in order to prolong its survival.

I moved to higher education more than a dozen years ago, just as newspapers were beginning their rapid descent. However, listening to my Cleveland State colleagues during the president's retreat, I could not help but draw comparisons between our current predicament and the one newspapers faced a few years ago.

Byron P. White is vice president for university engagement and chief diversity officer at Cleveland State University.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Calif. lawmakers not truthful with ballot measures

By Dan Walters, Sacramento Bee

As the ballot measure evolved into California's primary public policy tool over the last three-plus decades, clever people were paid large sums of money to figure out how to persuade voters. They adopted deception – there's no other word for it – as a technique.



Dan Walters

Measures were written that purported to do one thing while semi-secretly doing another, based on a cynical, although perhaps realistic, assumption that a significant number of voters would ignore details and act on first impulse.

Proposition 25, placed before voters in 2010 by Democratic politicians and their allies, principally unions, was one of many examples.

Its true underlying purpose was to change the legislative vote requirement on state budgets and so-called trailer bills from two-thirds to a simple majority, thus cutting Republicans out

of the process. But the wording of the measure implied that its major purpose was to punish the Legislature for missing a June 15 deadline for passing a budget.

Read the whole story

Letter: High praise for South Tahoe High School

To the community,

On Sept. 19 I attended the South Tahoe High School Fall Term Welcome. Wow! To say I was amazed and impressed would be to put it mildly.

This is my second freshman year as a parent, with a 15 year gap between my boys. Last school year was our first year back as parents of an LTUSD student. My youngest attended St. Theresa's from K-7. He, and we as a family, had a wonderful experience and recommend it highly. My oldest attended LTUSD schools from K-12 and had a wonderful experience, as did I as a parent. So as my youngest entered STMS, I had high hopes and expectations for his and our experience. Well, needless to say my expectations and hopes were not only realized, but were far above my expectations.

And then last Thursday I went to the Fall Term Welcome. At the risk of being redundant, let me say it again (capitalized), WOW! What I saw and heard floored me. A state of the art facility occupied by a teaching staff that would make Dan Wilvers and I coaching together look like we were dormice standing still. (Inside joke, ask Dan about, he tells the better version.) I'm talking some serious passion and

commitment within the hearts of those that are helping to shape and guide our children towards the future, and that future is a large part of the emphasis in this curriculum and those that teach and administrate it.

I’m totally stoked and looking forward to these next four years!

Toogee Sielsch, South Lake Tahoe

P.S. Ivone [Larson], I knew you were destined to achieve great things when you were Justin’s teacher at Al Tahoe, and when you put together that Summer Spanish Immersion program.

Opinion: Washoe Meadows advocates making progress

By Nancy Graalman

A growing coalition of statewide and Lake Tahoe preservation interests, intensifying voices from environmental scientists and economists, and – significantly – a recent court ruling are merging to heighten skepticism over the position of California’s State Parks Department that the only way to mend the Upper Truckee River is to downgrade South Lake Tahoe’s Washoe Meadows State Park in order to expand the Lake Tahoe Golf Course and embark on a massive mechanical transformation of the river’s course.

It is becoming apparent that the dysfunction within State Parks during the past decade of the restoration project’s conception and promotion calls into question the validity of the process and the promised outcomes. The state Legislature’s

emergency intervention within the Parks Department in the summer of 2012; the appointment of a new director; the August 2012 passage of AB1478 and its impact on parks administration; changes in thePark Commission composition; and, the recent introduction of the independent Parks Forward Commission point toward many years of ill-conceived and unrestrained ventures.



Washoe Meadows State Park on the South Shore.
Photo/LTN file

This disorder was recognized by Alameda County Superior Court Judge Evelio Grillo last month when he ruled that State Parks and the Park Commission failed to act with accountability and transparency and failed to comply with California's CEQA laws when the Commission approved the Upper Truckee Restoration Project and Golf Course Reconfiguration Project in October 2011. He found that the Washoe Meadows Community's November 2011 lawsuit charging substantive mitigation and EIR deficiencies by Parks undoubtedly caused the department's quick procedural backtrack and the Commission's January 2012 re-vote on the project. Judge Grillo declared that even a single point in the suit was a "significant issue," and awarded Washoe Meadows Community a portion of the legal fees for proving State Parks' violations.

According to Lynne Paulson, leader of the Washoe Meadows Community, "Our second suit is now proceeding to seek full accountability for the EIR's deficiencies and the horrible

precedent set by Parks' decision to downgrade Washoe Meadows State Park. Such a move to strip a state park of its protected status renders all California parks vulnerable if the land becomes attractive for development or for-profit reasons."

The nearly 700-acre park – which includes forest woodlands, meadows and world-renowned, rare boglike wetlands called Fens – was purchased by the state in 1984 at a taxpayer cost of more than $11 million in today's dollars. Its natural resources were guaranteed protection by state statue with added defense through its designation as a state park.

The Washoe Meadows Community leads the campaign to promote an alternative to parks' plan to expand the golf course east of the Upper Truckee into the heart of Washoe Meadows, but groups such as the Tahoe Area Sierra Club, and its prominent chair Bob Anderson, are also sounding the alarm over the project's ecological and administrative miscalculations.

In addition, internationally respected scientists in diverse fields voice concerns that the State is ignoring warnings that the vast excavation and earth-moving project (some 300,000 cubic feet of dirt would be required to sculpt new golf holes along the river) and the subsequent course maintenance demands could result in unintended, permanent consequences for Lake Tahoe clarity, the spawning streams and fisheries, and Washoe Meadows' historic Fens.

The EIR accepted by the state even predicts – but dismisses as "temporary" – 15 to 20 years of increased sediment in the river flow due to construction impact.

The eminent scientist Charles Goldman, emeritus professor at UC Davis, said, "I was one of the scientists in the 1972 TRPA meetings reviewing a development proposal in what is now Washoe Meadows State Park, and I was dismayed then to learn that a golf course was proposed for this sensitive riparian area. Fortunately, reason and outrage at the proposal won the

day. Water quality is particularly threatened by a golf course not only because of fertilizers and other chemicals but also because of the necessity for irrigation. I urge today's agencies to only approve an alternative that protects rather than harms the health of the lake and not approve an alternative which has the potential for so many negative impacts."

Of the imposition of a golf course into Washoe Meadows, wetlands authority Robert Qualls of the University of Nevada, Reno said, "There will always be risks associated with the application of fertilizer in areas with a high water table such as exists to support the fens, and there is a risk of flushing of nutrients during floods. There would also the loss of the nutrient uptake by the more than 1,600 trees that would be removed for the course. The cumulative effect of numerous piecemeal changes can result in a major impairment of water resources and interfere with the productivity and water quality of aquatic ecosystems."

State Parks has relied on outdated economic and recreational models that favor for-profit concessionaires in its assertion that only a "traditional" golf course replacement will provide sustained revenue for parks, its Lake Valley Recreation Area, and the surrounding South Lake Tahoe region. Conversely, Washoe Meadows Community and its allies – highlighted by the leadership of El Dorado County Supervisor Norma Santiago – have advanced innovative alternatives developed by independent specialists that reflect contemporary conservation practices and future financial and social trends.

The coalition's intent remains to work with State Parks to restore the Upper Truckee, preserve Washoe Meadows as defined by statute, and propel South Lake Tahoe's future as a sport and recreation destination for all Californians.

Nancy Graalman is director of Defense of Place.