



Latest education report not exactly a ‘Thriller’

By Jim Waters

When the Congressional Black Caucus interrupted debate on energy policy in Washington with a call for a moment of silence for Michael Jackson, Louisville Rep. John Yarmuth, D-Ky., walked out.

Yarmuth told reporters he would have done “the same thing if it was Elvis.” The congressman called the stunt “ridiculous” and said he felt “close to nauseated.”

In fact, several events surrounding Jackson’s death, burial and resuscitation of his record sales could be considered “ridiculous.”

While California issues IOUs to its workers and Los Angeles faces a \$500-million deficit, taxpayers get stuck with the tab for Jackson’s \$1.5-million Staple Center send-off.

Ridiculous? At least.

However, this isn’t unlike the way Kentucky’s state government operates. In fact, when it comes to taxes and spending, the Legislature could honor Jackson by making its theme song “Don’t Stop ‘Til You Get Enough.”

The state spends millions of tax dollars each year on frivolous items such as polar bear exhibits, farmers’ markets and tax incentives for NASCAR races, then claims it doesn’t have the money to maintain roads and repair schools.

In light of L.A.’s dire financial condition, acting mayor Jan Perry begged for private donors to help pay overtime costs for Jackson’s memorial, including 4,173 police officers who provided security. Talk about “Off The Wall.”

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa returned from vacation to call Perry’s plea “ridiculous” and decreed the city would cover memorial costs by dipping into an emergency fund for earthquakes or terrorist attacks.

Meanwhile, the mayor’s spokesman called the \$1.5-million tally “a success” because it was “far less” than the \$3.8 million officials had estimated. Kids can’t go to school and the elderly can’t get services, but taxpayers should consider an entertainer’s memorial at *only* \$1.5 million a “success?”

All L.A. taxpayers can do is “Blame it on the Boogie.”

But that’s not any more ridiculous than Louisville NAACP President Raoul Cunningham saying Yarmuth should have “shut up” instead of expressing his views.

Ironic, isn't it, that a man charged with advancing the interests of black Kentuckians would have advised Yarmuth to keep his mouth shut, even when Yarmuth believed what was going on was wrong?

"Human Nature," Jackson might say. Maybe. But what if all the great civil-rights leaders would have kept their mouths shut?

An issue much tougher to address but much more worthy of Cunningham's attention: Most of the black leaders in this state have remained hush-hush far too long about the plight of poor black children.

A new U.S. Department of Education report shows Kentucky's black students falling farther behind their white peers, who aren't doing so hot themselves. The department's Institute of Education Sciences reported on July 14 that Kentucky's black-to-white math achievement gaps grew wider between 1992 and 2007.

Some in Frankfort already are trying to spin the department's report in order to squelch the anxiety of parents across this commonwealth who wonder why their kids keep falling farther behind.

A comparison of National Assessment of Educational Progress, called NAEP, math scores shows Kentucky's fourth-grade black students trail whites by 19 points (the gap is 238 to 219 on the NAEP's 500-point scale). Kentucky's whites fall 10 points behind the average performance of whites nationwide, which means Kentucky's black students scored a whopping 29 points behind the national average of whites: 248 to 219.

The news gets more unsatisfactory for Kentucky's black eighth-graders, who trail their white counterparts in math by 25 points and the nation's whites by 33 points.

Yet, Cunningham gets worked up about Yarmuth.

I'm looking for Cunningham's plan to "Heal the World" of education for Kentucky's black children.

Finding none, I can only conclude that he, too, has left the building.

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