



Bluegrass Beacon

BY JIM WATERS

Fudging numbers sweetens the call for tax increases

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When it comes to tax increases, the state's largest newspaper seems to have lost its objectivity and its calculator.

The Courier-Journal's editorial page even sunk so low as to call state Senate Majority Leader Dan Kelly a liar. In a recent letter to the editor, Kelly, R-Springfield, wrote to correct the newspaper's claims that budget cuts forced 1,169 people statewide off school payrolls.

Using credible data, Kelly revealed that a net gain of 56 new teachers occurred, not a loss.

"Don't believe today's letter from Senate Majority Leader Dan Kelly," was the terse editorial response.

Actually, it's the newspaper's claim of deep cuts in education personnel that comes with incomplete evidence to support it. The newspaper used outdated and incomplete data in order to push lawmakers into raising taxes.

This approach reminds me of a statement the fictional detective Sherlock Holmes once made: "It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly, one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts."

This pearl of wisdom would bring an affirmative nod from Dr. Watson. But it escapes the C-J's editorial board, which failed to crack open the oyster. The way the newspaper uses data taken from a Kentucky School Boards Association Survey conducted last summer is fishy, at best.

First, the survey wasn't intended to paint a picture of Kentucky's education employment. Rather, it was created for internal use and

designed to help develop the group's legislative agenda for 2009.

Second, the association conducted the survey last summer – before the school year began.

"This survey was collected before new hires in schools could be totaled into the overall loss-gain equation," said Richard Innes, education analyst. "It could not tell us if the number of teachers on this year's payroll is larger or smaller than last year."

Kelly based his statement on data that all school districts submit to the Kentucky Department of Education several months after the start of each school year.

"It only took a few phone calls to check this out," Innes said. "But the Courier-Journal's editors were too eager to discredit Sen. Kelly instead of investigating the facts first."

What happened isn't rocket science. It's Editorial Writing 101.

The editorial writers have an agenda to help Frankfort's big spenders avoid making hard budget decisions by extorting even more of our hard-earned money. The survey's results would – in their skewed view – bolster their misguided claims.

But the fact that the newspaper used such misleading information to impugn Kelly for keeping his no-new-taxes pledge raises serious doubts about the credibility of its position on the need for more taxes.

As for a calculator, even if 1,169 jobs did get cut – nearly half of which the association's survey results cited as nonteaching-related jobs – the numbers don't lead to more taxes. The state holds 1,238 public schools, meaning that, on average, each school – even if the association's incomplete numbers were right – would have lost less than one employee each.

Most reasonable and clear-thinking Kentuckians wouldn't consider that grounds for a tax increase.

In fact, some cuts may be appropriate – even without budget problems. An analysis of data in the NCES Digest of Education Statistics shows Kentucky ranks last in the nation when the ratio of teachers is

compared to total school staff.

Even if I disagree with a publication's editorial positions, I respect the ones that carefully and thoroughly research their positions. They support editorial positions with sound reasoning and solid facts.

But I disdain sloppy, unprofessional work by journalists on whom the public relies for accurate information.

You should, too.

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