

On the subject of...

Light bulbs

by Viki Eggers Mason



THE TRUTH IN BLACK AND WHITE

The Aberdeen Advocate

Last weekend I had a Gestalt moment. Being generally a dull woman, epiphanies seldom come my way so when the light-bulb appeared over my head and the answers suddenly materialized before me, it was a very bright moment in an otherwise uneventful week.

I have been troubled for a number of years over the fact that I seem to be alone in my outrage over the behavior of some of our public servants. I've been hammering away at my keyboard for over two years now, hoping to awaken your sense of indignity – your righteous anger – over the colossal mismanagement of your city government by our elected officials. You read what I write. I know you do because you tell me my perspective makes you think differently about some things. You smile and nod and eagerly beg for more. What you don't do, however, is stand up beside me in anger and protest. How is it that you swear by what I say and then fail to rise up with me in revolt over our mistreatment? Why have we not yet

stormed City Hall? Why has nothing changed?

I've often wondered if you were all just nicer people than I am. I've speculated that each of you took to heart the admonition of your mother when she said, "If you can't say something nice about somebody, don't say anything at all." (Unless, of course, you first say "Bless his heart.") I think this manifestation of Southern manners is very gracious and it makes me smile, but it's killing this community and until the other day I couldn't for the life of me find an explanation for your inaction.

Then, while locked in a lively discussion about being a Christian with two southern friends, one pink, one brown, the lights came on. It came to me that some of you may perceive what I do in *The Aberdeen Advocate* as being publicly judgmental of others (a decidedly un-Christian thing to do) and

then, even worse, not forgiving them for their failings. Duh! Sometimes I amaze myself! Here then, reader friends, is an attempt to help you see the difference between "beating up on somebody just for the fun of it" and what I do, which is called "taking care of business."

As citizens of this community, you and I each have an obligation to be good stewards. It is our duty to watch after the corporation otherwise known as the City of Aberdeen and to do everything within our power to keep the company alive and thriving for the generations to come. It is our business and our future and it's our job to safeguard it. We must manage to manage.

The people I write about in *The Advocate* have asked for, and been entrusted with, certain responsibilities in our community. We pay them well to attend to those responsibilities and we must see to it

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Prairie School shows improvement

By Contributing Editor Don Rowe

Below are the results of the Mississippi Curriculum Test for Aberdeen's 4th-6th graders which was administered by the State Department of Education this past May for Mississippi students in grades 2-8. The test results, which were released in August, include a score which is the mean number on a scale of 200-760 in reading, 160-775 in language and 140-775 in math.

In addition to the score for each school or school district, the State Department of Education also lists

the percentage of the students whose individual scores placed them in one of four proficiency levels: Minimal – the lowest proficiency level; Basic – students are passing but need help; Proficient – students are doing well; Advanced – the highest proficiency level.

To put it into terms all of us can relate to, these four groupings are similar to a modern-day report card, which grades students "A" through "F:" Minimal – the "F" students

who failing; Basic – the "D" students who are border line, at best; Proficient – the low "B" and "C" students; the average, if you will; Advanced – the high "B" and "A" students – the cream of the crop so to speak. (NOTE: The stated goal of the state department and that of all educators throughout Mississippi,

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that they earn their compensation.

Let me remind you, as I have many times in the past, I bear no personal animosity toward any of the elected officials I write about here so often. I barely know them as human beings. I take no interest in their personal lives apart from the fact that I pray for them regularly. I do not judge them as human beings here – that’s up to God. My function (and yours, by the way) is to evaluate them as EMPLOYEES which, of course, they are.

As anybody in business will tell you, employees need mentoring and guidance in order to do their jobs well. There is nothing arbitrary about it. Each of our employees has a job description and our job is to measure their performance against it. Ultimately, we are responsible to make sure they make the necessary corrections which keep them moving toward the goals WE have chosen – in Aberdeen’s case, a healthy economy, an exceptional school system, safe streets and more affordable taxes.

Sadly, what we’re faced with here in Aberdeen is a set of employees – more precisely aldermen - who are badly spoiled. For too many years the boss has been on vacation. For too many years they have done precisely as they pleased with no “interference” from the folks in charge. These men refuse to acknowledge the lines between employer, employee and emperor. They are laboring under the misconception that they, not we, run the show.

These men feel perfectly justified in using company facilities, materials and money for their own purposes – and, to make matters worse, they allow some employees (like municipal Judge Adrian Haynes) the same limitless access to the taxpayers’ pocketbook.

They have hired, fired, reprimanded, suspended and otherwise inspired fear and loathing in our several departments without regard for the constitutional rights of their co-workers, causing our “corporation” to be embroiled in many lawsuits at great cost to the taxpayers.

The aldermen have seated volunteer boards to look after critical issues like planning and zoning, and then become indignant when the board proposed to actually FOLLOW THE PLAN and ENFORCE THE LAW—both of which have been in place for many years. Their answer to the latest zoning snafu was simply to replace the board with cronies who subscribe to the “Aldermen are Emperors” mindset.

They have bled the electric company’s resources away by charging some households for services while other households pay little or nothing. (Last week my website was lit up with discussion over the WCBI news story of the man and woman whose power was disconnected over a three -housand dollar bill. Hello? How many months did we allow this non-payment to continue before we finally flipped the switch?) This sort of selectivity finds its way into all the nooks and crannies of city government and it will, I fear, be our undoing.

These deeds were all done in the name of taxpayers like you and me. They were done with our blessings – I know this because we haven’t yet stopped them.

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Prairie School shows improvement

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including Aberdeen, is to have all their students perform at the proficient level or above.)

In addition, these test scores, along with many other factors too complicated to mention, determine the particular level each school is assigned. These rankings range from a Level 1 (unsuccessful) to a Level 5 (superior performing). In between are the schools ranked Level 2 (under performing), Level 3 (successful) and Level 4 (exemplary).

Again, to simplify these terms, Level 4 and Level 5 schools are the better schools; Level 1 districts are going to be taken over by the state; Level 2 schools are cause for alarm; and Level 3 schools, despite the state’s “successful” tag, are nothing more than average schools – the middle of the pack.

Before looking at the scores for grades 4-6, permit me to answer several *Advo-*

cate readers who questioned why I compare the scores for Aberdeen’s schools to other school districts in Northeast Mississippi. My answer to that question is that a stand-alone test score has no real meaning to the average reader. It can be anything you want it to be.

I like to compare the mean numbers compiled by each school on the test to the season-ending record of a football team. Each week, a score is kept between two competing teams so that a winner can be determined at the end of the game. Naturally, the team which scores the most points gets the win and the team which scores the fewest points is charged with the loss.

Over the course of the season, the wins and the losses are compiled and this final record determines whether the team had a successful season, a break-even season or a losing season. Naturally, the best teams record-wise go on to the playoffs for a

chance to win a state championship, while those on the opposite end of the standings pack up their gear and wait for next year. Thus, by keeping score and compiling records, it’s not hard to separate the wheat from the chaff.



Now, I fully realize that test scores are far more important in the overall scheme of things than are scores for sporting events, but the same concept applies in determining those schools which seem to have higher test scores and those which finish at the lower end of the spectrum. To be sure, it’s important to note that the overall level assigned to each school is determined by a number of factors, but don’t lose sight of the fact that test scores play an important role in that ranking. In other words, you won’t find a Level 5 school with low test scores. So with that question answered, let’s take a look at how Prairie and the Middle School fared on this year’s MCT.

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Prairie Schools Show Improvement

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Impressively, Prairie made significant improvement in two of its test scores, going from a 532.4 math score a year ago to a 547.4 (an increase of 15 points) and from a 522.6 language score to a 531.3 this time around. A slight drop from 520.7 to 516.1 in reading is all that prevented Prairie from a trifecta.

Equally impressive was the fact Prairie made significant gains in its proficiency levels. For example, one year ago 16.7% of Prairie's language test-takers finished at the minimal level. This year, only 4.4% of its students fell into the worst proficiency level – an impressive 12.3% improvement. In math, the percentage dropped from 26.2% last year to 18.4% this year – just 2.2% over the state average – while in reading there was a 1.2% improvement from 15.9% a year ago to 14.7% this year.

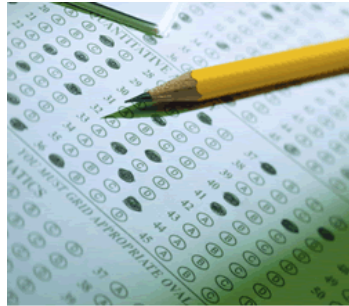
Prairie also posted improvement in the percentage of students who tested out in the combined minimal and basic levels: 31.6% in reading, down from 35.7% last year; 41.9% in language, down from 46.1%; and 41.2% in math, down from 47.6%. As a result, Prairie also improved its percentage of proficient and advanced students: from 64.3% in reading last year to 68.4% this year; from 53.9% in language to 58.1%; and from 52.3% in math to 58.8%.

Compared with its neighboring schools and/or school districts in North Mississippi, Prairie ranked either 6th or 7th from the bottom (35th of 41 in reading, 35th of 41 in language and 36th of 41 in math), but again, there was improvement over last year when it finished in the bottom three in reading and language and fourth from last in math.

Moving on to the middle school, which reportedly retained its Level 3 ranking, scores were down in all three tests in both the 4th and 5th grades. Grade 4 went from a 2006 507.7 reading score to a 499.0 this year, from a 505.6 language score to a 504.0 and from a 511.4 math score to a 504.2. Grade 5, meanwhile, dropped from a 520.5 reading score to a 511.7, from a 537.7 language score to a 523.2 and from a 528.1

Both grades also slipped considerably in the minimal proficiency category. The 4th grade went from just 0.9% of its students at the minimal level a year ago to almost 10% (9.7%) this year, while the 5th grade went from a 3.9% last year to 12.1% this year.

At the opposite end of the proficiency categories, last year's 4th-graders had 21% in the advanced level but slipped to 16% this year, while the 5th grade dropped from a 20.3% to 14.5%.



Both grades also finished well under the state average on all three tests – an average of 22.6 points below the state average for the 4th grade and 18 points for the 5th grade.

As to the comparison with other Northeast Mississippi schools and/or school districts, Aberdeen's 4th-graders finished third from the bottom (39th of 41) in both the reading and language scores, and fifth from the bottom (37th of 41) on the math score. The 5th grade managed to finish a little higher: fifth from the bottom in reading, sixth from the bottom in language and seventh from the bottom in math.

On the plus side, unlike the abysmal numbers attributed to the high school where no less than two out of three AHS students finish in the minimal and basic categories, Aberdeen's 4th and 5th grades have significant numbers of students whose test scores place them in the top two proficiency levels. For the 4th grade, the numbers read as follows: 86.3% in reading, 63.7% in language and 72.5% in math. The 5th grade, meanwhile, had 78.2% of its reading students, 67.8% of its language students and 59.7% of its math students in the top two proficiency levels.

In summary, although Aberdeen's 4th-6th grade test scores still rank well below most of their counterparts throughout the state and here in Northeast Mississippi, the percentage of students whose test scores place them the proficient and advanced levels are certainly encouraging.

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community in crisis. We have trouble on every front. What is most interesting to me is that each of our crises can be followed back to the same single root cause. The aldermen, you ask? Nope. Aberdeen's impending demise can be placed at the feet of—guess who—you.

The greatest enemy our community faces is the demon known as apathy. It is your unwillingness to stand up and be counted which is responsible for sending Aberdeen down the path to ruin.

Allow me to say here that there are many things right and good about our community. I know men and women who devote themselves and their resources to making positive changes every day and for them I'm abundantly grateful. When I think of people like Ralph and Jeri Saxton, Dwight Stevens and Dr. Weston Fisher who, for whatever reason, alighted in our troubled little town I get giddy. What good fortune to have such bright people in our midst!

Nevertheless, the demon looms larger even than the stalwart souls among us. Their good works along with the gracious deeds of the many service organizations and churches in town are, I'm afraid, lost in the shadows of our doom.

Our apathy—our stubborn refusal to actively involve ourselves in the business of guiding our city government – will be the end of us. Unless and until we each step up to our civic duty, we will continue to slide down the wide road to corporate bankruptcy.

If you doubt me, ask the citizens of Okolona about "too little, too late." The citizens there have organized a political action committee to address the mismanagement of their corporate finances, but, sadly their treasury is already so depleted that they may never recover. (Oh. Another thing we have in common with Okolona—they, too, hired Ascension Financial to help them manage their money.)

Am I judgmental? Do I harp on negative things? Yes, yes I do. But I think I have very good reason to do so. Ultimately, it's like house-breaking a puppy. You can choose to walk around the smelly evidence and ignore the growing problem, or you can bring the appropriate attention and discipline to bear upon the situation. *You can save Aberdeen.* Or not. You get to choose.



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*"Crisis is an opportunity riding a dangerous wind."
...old Chinese proverb*

