

Dispatch from Carson City

SMOKING KILLS BRAIN CELLS

...especially Senator McGinness's. What was he thinking when he gave us his lame-brained juvenile smoking bill?

Senate Bill #14 would make it the responsibility of Juvenile Court to monitor every kid caught smoking and cure him of the addiction. Does McGinness have a clue what chaos would ensue?

BY GLENN CAMPBELL

CARSON CITY—Smoking is bad, no doubt about it. Nicotine is a highly addictive drug, like meth and crack. It is not as damaging in the short term, but the long-term costs are huge. Especially heartbreaking is seeing our teenagers become addicted to smoking, putting their lifelong health at risk.

So what's the solution? State Senator Mike McGinness thinks he has one: Dump the problem on juvenile courts.

Under his Senate Bill #14, any minor found in possession of tobacco products would be judged, on the second offense, as a "child in need of

supervision."

Whose supervision? The counties', of course. The bill implies a huge local smoking-treatment bureaucracy, because once you label a child as needing supervision then someone has to do it.

If the senator gets his way and every child with a cig in his pocket gets hauled into court, this is going to massively impact the juvenile court and probation systems. It could become a Hurricane Katrina of frivolous cases that would severely damage enforcement of "real" juvenile crime. In urban counties, the law would divert significant resources and personnel into smoking interdiction.

Forcing the court into this role implies that McGinness has a solution to nicotine addiction. Tell us, dear



In related news, Barbara Buckley receives the Big Hammer from the hammer giver guy.

Senator, what it is—a patch, hypnosis, acupuncture? Are we going to set up "smoking courts" where kids are monitored and randomly tested, or are we going to monitor parents to monitor their children? Whatever "supervision" McGinness envisions, it is going to cost money, tons of it, but his bill provides not one red cent for implementation.

This sounds like yet another

“unfunded mandate,” where a disconnected legislature passes an idealistic, do-good law but leaves the counties to foot the bill.

Another effect is more subtle: Kids who are forced into juvenile court for minor violations aren't going to be afraid of it anymore. It will be harder to deter kids from car theft and drug dealing if they have already been to court for smoking and found it a joke.

Juvenile court already has its hands full with conventional drug addiction. The advantage there is that meth, crack and pot are illegal. Cigarettes are not. Kids smoke mainly because their parents do. Cigarettes are always going to be available in these homes regardless of what the court does.

Does McGinness propose that the county inspect people's homes and require that all cigarettes be secured, just like firearms? Come to think of it, does McGinness have ANY CLUE how Senate Bill #14 is going to be implemented in the real world? Has he ever visited a real juvenile court in the Big City—not just in the cow counties he represents? Has he ever spoken to a judge, probation officer, public defender or D.A. about his brilliant idea?

Or is he just blowing smoke rings of good intentions?

The funny thing is, this guy is a Republican. This is the sort of Nanny State legislation you would expect from the Democrats, who want the government to solve all social ills. The Republicans, we thought, were more likely to say, “Yes, it's a problem, but it is the parents' problem.” Merely the existence of a problem does not imply that the government has the means or mandate to solve it.

At least not when Rome is burning and there are much bigger problems to address.

[A Judiciary committee hearing on this bill is scheduled for Feb. 8.]

KINDERGARTEN PROPOSAL

And speaking of fiddling while Rome burns, incoming Assembly Speaker Barbara Buckley nicely illustrated her Democratic detachment

from reality in her keynote address yesterday. In her very first speech of the very first legislative session, immediately upon her enthronement in Speakerhood, Barbara spoke passionately about education.

She accurately described the statewide meltdown in public education, especially in the south. She noted that Nevada ranks as one of the worst states in high school dropout rates. She also acknowledged the teacher crisis in the south—how the Clark County School District faces a desperate shortage of teachers because it cannot pay a competitive wage.

What is Barbara's solution?

All-day kindergarten.

That's right, in the same breath where she acknowledged that local school systems aren't meeting their obligations to students and can't hire enough teachers, she proposed to expand the school systems by another half a grade.

Where, pray tell, are these teachers going to come from? And whose funding are we going to have to raid to support this Pollyanna proposal?

“It makes sense that if children are in school more, they're going to learn more,” said Barbara.

It makes sense IN WHAT UNIVERSE? Nevada has a severe drop-out problem. The real crisis in the real world of real Nevada is not children entering the system unprepared. The problem is them not staying in the system past the sixth grade.

Puberty is the problem, Barbara. What are you going to do about it?

Kids don't stay in school in Nevada because, frankly, our school systems suck. In Las Vegas, there are hardly any counseling services to speak of, hardly any curriculum beyond the legally required minimums and no money to pay teachers what they are worth. Beyond elementary, schools here are huge, highly punitive cattle processing facilities with few resources to address individual needs, especially in the teen years. No wonder kids are dropping out.

There are all sorts of ways that the

state could step up to the plate but hasn't. That would require hard compromises and tough funding decisions that Barbara wouldn't dare insert in her keynote speech. Instead, she gave us a non-solution: all-day kindergarten. It is a proposal that no one would disagree with in principle but that isn't going anywhere this session, so it's a harmless diversion to distract from real issues.

In the lovefest that preceded Barbara's coronation, one speaker after another praised her courage, her tenacity, her intelligence, her strategic skills, and above all her womanliness, being the first female Assembly Speaker.

Yeah, she's a credit to her gender, but she's still a lame-brain like McGinness. (Idiocy knows no gender or party boundaries.) That she is opening the session with an implausible kindergarten proposal suggests that she has little or no ability to see the big picture.

Barbara has exactly one skill: politics. She is actually quite brilliant in this regard, with an unquestioned ability to say the right words and twist the right arms to get things done.

The only question is whether they are the right things.

—GC

Funding Appeal: Family Court Chronicles is your only source for the straight poop on juvenile justice, child welfare and domestic despair. We'll give you the real news that the other so-called news media are clueless about, but we need your financial support. Our editor lives like a mouse to keep this project going, but research, printing and travel are inherently expensive. If you want us to return to Carson City and produce more reporting like this, please send us your donations. (\$20 would be graciously accepted, while \$500 would fund a week-long expedition to the capital, with cheeseburgers.) Donate via our website or the address on the masthead. Phone 702-812-0400