

## Arkansas educators should beware of fallen Buckeyes

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By William L. Bainbridge

Some state and federal leaders seem amazed when local school-board members and administrators are resistant to more big government interference in the operation of public schools, whether it is through legislation or bureaucratic agency regulation.

Recent events in Ohio and Arkansas provide a good understanding of the resistance.

In May 2002, when Franklin County Common Pleas Judge Jennifer L. Brunner ruled that Randall A. Fischer, chief of the state's massive school-construction program, "acted without authority" in awarding \$2 billion in construction contracts over five years, many educators and guardians of the taxpayers thought Fischer's involvement in education-funded projects would be over.

Wrong! A big-government decision in a state 760 miles away has allowed Fischer to assume a similar position of power over school construction.

One contractor awarded \$4 million in consulting contracts in Ohio was William S. DeJong and Associates of Dublin. Last spring, when I saw William DeJong in a meeting, he argued that he saw nothing wrong with what Fischer had done. Obviously not. He since has hired Fischer as a subcontractor to work with him on a similar project in Arkansas.

As program manager for a task force on educational facilities in Arkansas, Fischer wrote a letter to Design Professionals saying that he will "evaluate the statements of qualifications and interview individual firms to further determine qualification, availability of resources and other factors. The number of contracts awarded is within the discretion of the Task Force."

Thus, the person who was found to have inappropriately accepted dinners, golf outings and other perks from contractors in Ohio is in a similar powerful role over school-construction in the Razorback state, where officials acknowledge awareness of Fischer's problems in Ohio.

Fischer's heavy-handed approach to school-facility management and funding was first questioned by me in a column, "State should fund school auditoriums" that ran in the April 29, 2000, *Dispatch*. At that time, Fischer's contention was that auditoriums could not be funded, "since we only fund facilities which are in constant use." The constant-use argument didn't hold water when compared with other state facilities being funded and had no basis in educational outcomes. The statement simply wasn't true.

Horace Mann, the founder of the nation's public-school system, envisioned schools as the fourth branch of government. It was his idea that schools be free of the entanglements and endangerment associated with politics in state government. With employment decisions such as those made in this case by Ohio and Arkansas state authorities, it is no wonder local school-

board members and administrators are frustrated with the continually growing regulations imposed by state and federal government in this era of "No Child Left Behind."

Likewise, it is no surprise that ethical standards are held in such high regard in most public-school systems throughout the country. Practicing ethics in the purchasing field includes demonstrating integrity and credibility when spending public funds, and avoiding any situations where a person may gain personally.

Even the appearance of impropriety is carefully monitored at the local level. There have been a few cases nationally of unethical school administrators, but court records would give them an A+ compared with politically appointed managers at the state level.

Ethics involves values of pride and self-worth, standards and ideals, and specifics of conduct and performance. Once the ethical process has been tainted, whether by perception or by an actual event, safeguards must be established at all levels.

Leaders in Arkansas have taken a great risk with public trust. Maybe they need to provide school-board members and administrators more authority in decisions over school facilities.

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