

The Journal

Re-taking the test

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The return of lawmakers for Gov. Jim Justice's special session for "education betterment" is right around the corner. Or is it?

Of course, we've technically been in special session since midnight March 9 as soon as the regular session ended. Lawmakers adjourned until a day and time as determined by Senate President Mitch Carmichael and House Speaker Roger Hanshaw. Legislators returned home to their districts to either take part in the education roundtables set up by the state Department of Education or set up their own factfinding missions.

Justice met with Carmichael and Hanshaw last week. I would have loved to be a fly on the wall. It certainly sounds like there is broad agreement of most everything that was in the House and Senate versions of Senate Bill 451 that went down in flames (pun intended).

Everything, that is, except charter schools and education savings accounts. In other words, we are about to have some *deja vu* — a repeat of the battles we saw during the legislative session. That's why I say that the resumption of the special session coinciding with the May 20-21 interim meetings might not happen. If a consensus can't be reached on these issues beforehand, Carmichael and Hanshaw won't call lawmakers back yet. To do so without agreement will cost taxpayers \$35,000 per day after May 21.

The disagreement, once again, will be over the number of charter schools and whether to create a permanent program or a pilot program. The Senate wanted as many as six charters (seven counting the state Schools for the Deaf and the Blind) and wanted the program permanent. The House wanted a two-school charter pilot created from existing elementary schools in the state.

I'm still amused at the effort by two county Republican executive committees and the Federation of College Republican to use no-confidence resolutions to force Justice to support the state Republican platform, specifically as it pertains to school choice. Justice has been solidly on the record for a three-school charter pilot. The issue isn't the governor. It's some Republican members of the House of Delegates, some of whom represent districts with strong support of their schools, teachers, their unions and some districts where Democrats make up the majority of voters.

That issue didn't magically go away for House Republicans. And it's an issue of which Carmichael, Senate Education Chairwoman Patricia Rucker and even some members of the House Republican leadership need to be more sensitive. The governor may have the right idea going with a three-school pilot. It's a compromise the House might go for, and a smart compromise for the Senate to accept.

Advice for groups out there in favor of charter schools and education savings accounts: Leave the national think tanks representatives behind. If parents really want these options, they need to be out front advocating for them. They need to be seen.

I have nothing against think tanks. I worked for a think tank that was constantly accused of being a Koch brothers front a decade ago. Whether it's the West Virginia Center for Budget and Policy on the left or the Cardinal Institute on the right, think tanks provide a valuable service to lawmakers, policy wonks and the press.

But if these are issues that people care about, then they need to be contacting their representatives in Charleston. The issue of charter schools will not be decided on the testimony of someone from the Cato Institute. It will be decided on the plea of a parent with a child trapped in a low-performing school.

Lastly, an article popped up in my email from Jacobin magazine, a publication that offers "socialist perspectives on politics, economics, and culture." In a review of a book on the various teacher/school service personnel strikes across the nation by Kanawha County Spanish teacher Emily Comer, she said something interesting:

"... The decisions of my local Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) chapter in Charleston proved to be instrumental in the development and outcome of the strike."

Comer's fellow Kanawha County teacher, Jay O'Neal, was quoted in the book saying "... my main regret of the strike is that we didn't have a strong statewide structure of like-minded educators, through which we could have formulated and won things like a clear set of demands, particularly around taxing the rich and corporations."

Both Comer and O'Neal were ranked 40th on Politico Magazine's 50 Ideas Driving Politics (and the People Behind Them). They're being touted as the face of teachers strike. If that is the case, was the teachers strike about better pay and health care security, or was it about socialism and redistributing wealth?

Since O'Neal appears to be complaining about other teachers not being on board with their goals, I'd say that means that a good many teachers are not really down with the socialism agenda. It is also more evidence of my theory that once a teacher is alone in the ballot box, they probably vote the same way the communities they live in do. If they didn't, the Legislature would have gone blue in 2018.