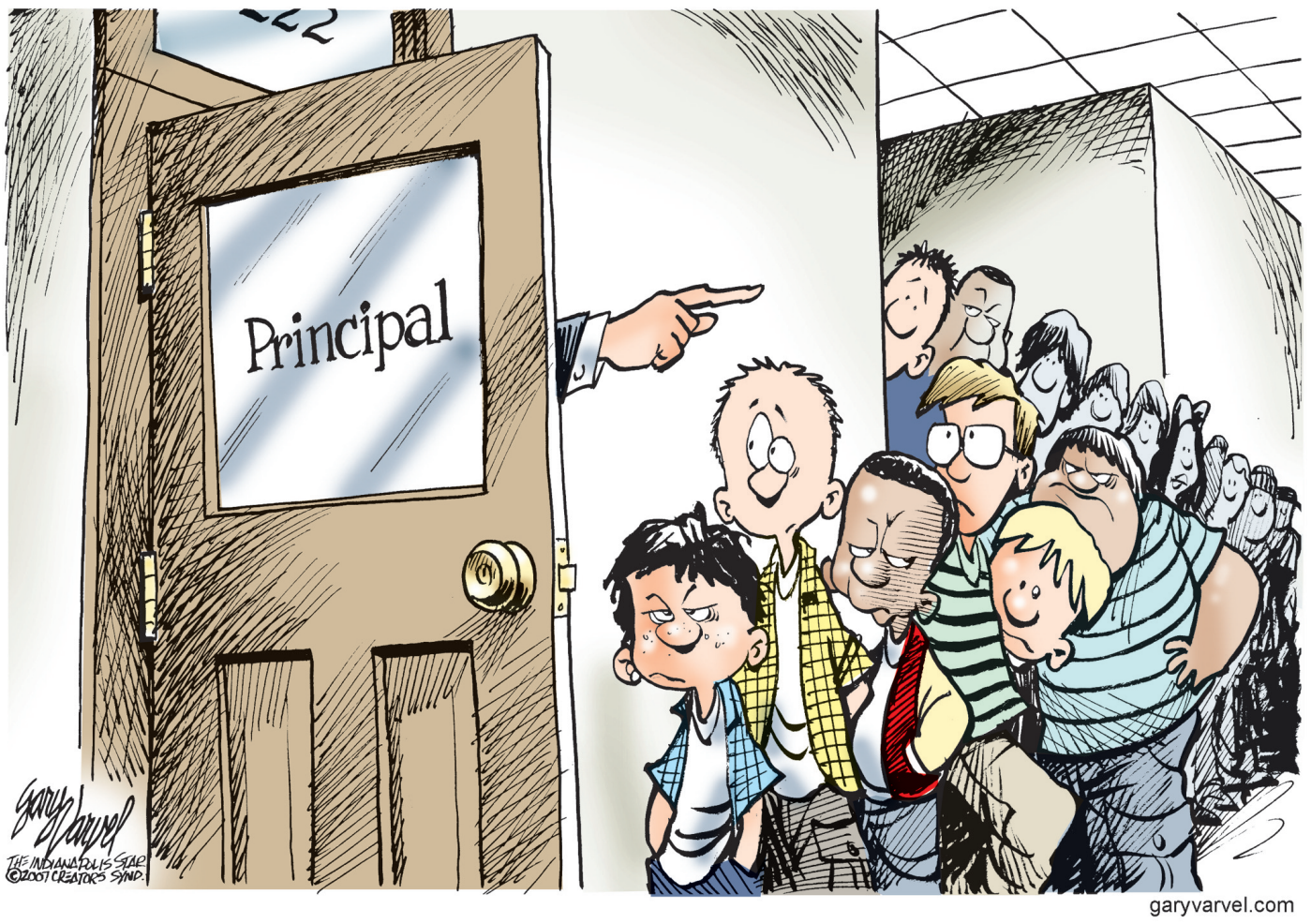
EDITORIAL



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Out of school, out of touch

Our position:
Schools should find alternatives to the overuse of the harshest forms of discipline.

Students at Lynhurst 7th and 8th Grade Center were suspended at a rate of 79 per 100 students during the 2005-06 school year, further burnishing the Wayne Township middle school's notoriety for being among the highest-suspending schools in the state.

Most of those suspensions, however, weren't meted out to dangerous troublemakers.

Nineteen percent of suspensions were for such obviously dangerous activities as brandishing guns, possessing drugs or injuring teachers and fellow students.

Half of all suspensions, on the other hand, were for subjective charges such as "defiance," the catch-all category of "other" — which can include nonviolent offenses such as chronic truancy — and one-time schoolyard brawls.

Lynhurst exemplifies the reality that, far too often, schools overuse out-of-school suspensions and expulsions for behaviors that can be better handled through other means.

The overuse, in turn, contributes to the state's dropout crisis. Sixth-graders who were suspended at least once had just a one-in-six chance of graduating, according to a study of Philadelphia students led by Johns Hopkins researcher Robert Balfanz.

The overuse of suspension and expulsion, along with the presence of zero-tolerance policies, is a national problem. Most cases aren't like high-profile examples such as the three Knightstown High students who were expelled from (and later readmitted to) school for producing a film in which a teddy bear threatened the life of a teacher.

But Indiana's schools have had a particularly nasty reputation for suspending and expelling more students than those in other states:

◆ Most suspensions are for matters other than drugs, weapons possession and violent behavior: Forty-seven percent of out-of-school suspensions at Lawrence North High School during the 2005-06 school year were for "other" unlisted reasons. Just 9 percent of suspensions were for drugs and weapons possession.

Statewide, less than 3 percent of in-school and out-of-school suspensions were for possession of weapons, drugs, alcohol and tobacco.

While schools are categorizing fewer suspensions under the subjective category "disruptive behavior", they are categorizing those punishments under "defiance," a category created as a result of a round of anti-dropout legislation that can be just as subjective as the former.

◆ Schools are suspending more students: Some 819 out-of school suspensions were meted out each day of the 2005-06 school year, a 15 percent increase over the suspensions handed down seven years ago.

Meanwhile, the state retains its reputation for expelling more students than any other in the nation. Expulsions have increased by 11 percent between 2003-04 and 2005-06 school years after a four-year decline.

◆ Marion County middle schools suspend more students than high schools: On average, middle schools have a suspension rate of 58 per 100 students, four times the statewide average. The rate for high schools is just 29 per 100.

Shortridge Middle School, now being converted by Indianapolis Public Schools into a magnet program, has an astonishing rate of 91 per 100 students.

◆ Black students are suspended more often than their white peers: Revelations by The Star's Andy Gammill and Mark Nichols that black students are suspended three times more often than white students confirm conclusions reached 12 years ago by the Indianapolis Commission on African-American Males.

This is a national problem: Blacks accounted for 33 percent of suspensions despite accounting for 17 percent of public school enrollment.

Fears over school safety, arising from real day-to-day concerns and high-profile incidents, is partly to blame for rising suspension numbers.

The methods teachers and administrators use to deal with school behavior are also a culprit.

The lack of training on how to handle students in real-world classroom settings — an issue that former Teachers College President Arthur Levine and teaching guru Martin Haberman argue has fostered problems in other aspects of education — is also a factor in discipline. Frustrated teachers opt to toss students out of classrooms — and hand them over to academic deans and principals — before availing themselves of other options.

This lack of training also exacerbates cultural differences between minority students and teachers, most of who remain white and female. The problem grows in middle schools, no matter the race of the teacher, as children develop into teenagers who, despite their emotional development, begin to take on the physical characteristics of adults.

Flexibility in state law governing school discipline, which grants principals the chief decision-making role, contributes to the disparities in discipline. Depending on the district or even the school, a student can be suspended for using a cell phone on school grounds.

While the need to maintain safe, orderly schools is important, the overuse of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions does little to address bad behavior and its underlying causes. Suspended students simply end up at home without parental supervision — and falling behind in school.

Solving those underlying issues and stemming the use of harsh school discipline is one of the many keys to improving the odds of students graduating from school and being prepared for college and the working world.

The initiatives taken up by IPS over the past three years, including the creation this year of alternative programs for wayward students, can help, but only if properly implemented. Such programs have a history of being little more than dumping grounds for students that schools have given up on teaching.

More importantly, teachers, principals and even parents will have to take different approaches to discipline.

Engaging students, especially those at risk of academic failure, is key to keeping students out of trouble and on track towards graduation. Mentoring arrangements, along with music and art programs, can help in this regard.

Applying alternative programs such as those used by the Knowledge Is Power Program of charter schools, in which a student can lose his seat and desk for misbehavior and rewards positive behavior, can also help.

A student who isn't in school will not learn. Figuring out alternatives to suspensions and expulsions is key to keeping students on the path to finishing school.

ONLINE: CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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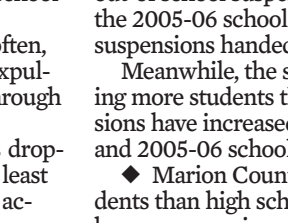
Liberals apparently immune from rules of hypocrisy



JONAH GOLDBERG

In the wake of the Larry Craig "Bathroomgate" story, some intrepid free-market-oriented bloggers came up with a novel solution to the problem of closeted gay conservatives indulging their carnal desires on the side. Gay sex offsets.

The same market-based approach is used by environmentally crapulent liberal celebrities all the time. They use private jets, drive around with big entourages and own numerous energy-sucking homes. To make amends, they purchase an indulgence in the form of "carbon offsets" — a contract whereby the equivalent amount of greenhouse gases are soaked up by newly planted trees and the like.

So why not do the same thing with gay sex? Cruise the bus station, cut a check to the heterosexuality-promoting organization of your choice.

Since most on the left think Craig's alleged sexual liaisons are perfectly benign, they shouldn't object. "Who are we to judge?" and all that. Rather, the left claims it hates Craig's hypocrisy, not his behavior.

From Rush Limbaugh's drug use to Bill Bennett's gambling to the long list of Republican politicians who've thrown a few earmarks and riders into their marriage vows, the left has chosen to denounce the perceived hypocrisy rather than the behavior. The indictment sometimes loses its punch in the details. Bennett never inveighed against gambling, for example.

But that misses the point. The left claims to hate "moralizers." So any failure to live like Jesus while telling others to follow his example is an outrage, even the defining challenge of our lives. (In 2005, Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean pledged, "I will use whatever position I have in order to root out hypocrisy.")

One solution to the hypocrisy epidemic, of course, is to have no morals at all. You can't violate your principles if you don't have any. Another solution: Simply define down your principles until they are conveniently consistent with your preferred lifestyle. My own perfect moral code would mandate a strict regimen of not enough exercise, too much scotch and a diet rich in cured meats. Men would be religiously barred from taking out the garbage until their wives told them no less than three times to do so. "Thou Shalt Not Shave More Than Thrice Monthly": I'd never be a hypocrite if only the Bible gave us commandments like that.

But the left has another solution. Under its system, you can still be a moralizer. You can still tell people what to do and how to live. And, best of all, you can still fall short of your ideals personally while guiltlessly trying to use government to impose your moral vision on others. All you have to do is become a liberal moralizer.

Once you become a liberal, you can wax eloquent on the glories of the public schools while sending your kids to private school. You can wax prolix about the greedy rich while making a fortune on the side. You can even use the government to impose your values willy-nilly, from racial quotas and confiscatory tax rates to draconian environmental policies and sex-ed for grade-schoolers — all of which will paid for in part by people who disagree with you.

You don't even have to give up traditional religion, so long as you now define the teachings of your faith in perfect compliance with the Democratic platform.

Why, just look at John Kerry. In 2004, the Democratic nominee repeatedly insisted that his religious faith is "why I fight against poverty. That's why I fight to clean up the environment and protect this earth. That's why I fight for equality and justice. All of those things come out of that fundamental teaching and belief of faith." Great! But when it comes to, say, abortion, consulting one's faith is a no-no: "What is an article of faith for me is not something that I can legislate on somebody who doesn't share that article of faith."

So I guess under a Kerry administration America's civil rights and economic and environmental policies would all be voluntary?

The point is simply this: Hypocrisy is bad, sure. But it's a human failing that should fall upon the individual in question. What the left wants to do is use hypocrisy as a cudgel to declare that conservative ideals are categorically illegitimate because some conservatives fail to live up to them. But we all fail to live up to our ideals sometimes (just ask John Edwards, who wants get rid of everyone's SUV, save the one in his driveway). That's sort of why we call them "ideals." Most of us don't fall as far as Larry Craig seems to have fallen, but that's not necessarily an indictment of his arguments, it's an indictment of the man.

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RUSS PULLIAM

Undecideds turn into believers

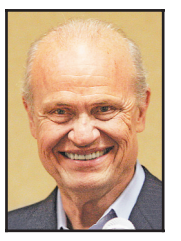
Fred Thompson is winning over some undecided Indiana Republican leaders. He made a favorable impression on delegates to last weekend's Midwest Republican Leadership Conference in Indianapolis.

Family values conservatives have been looking for a Ronald Reagan-type candidate but haven't found him among the big three: former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, and Arizona Sen. John McCain.

Thompson, the actor and former U.S. senator from Tennessee, may fill that role, as a pro-life, traditional values conservative who puts a high priority on the terrorist threat.

Asked at a news conference about his favorite presidents, Thompson named George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Ronald Reagan.

"I'm a great admirer of Ronald Reagan," Thompson said. "He was the great communicator. He believed so strongly in certain principles and was resolute about them. He was believable because he believed."



Fred Thompson

In his dinner speech Thompson identified terrorism as the top issue for the next president.

"Our country is in danger, and it will be that way for a long time," he said.

House Minority Leader Brian Bosma has been undecided but indicated he's leaning toward Thompson after meeting with him and hearing him speak.

"I was impressed," Bosma said. "He's talking about the right issues — security, opportunity for everyone and traditional values."

Bosma has had reservations about the other top candidates. He appreciates the hands-on experience of former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee but thinks he comes up short on experience with international terrorism. He finds Giuliani too liberal on social issues. He has doubts about Romney. He doesn't think John McCain's campaign is going to catch on.

"I want a Republican nominee who is best suited to lead the nation and who can win the presidency," Bosma said.

Like Bosma, state Rep. Jackie Walorski is a social and fiscal conservative. From the South Bend-Elkhart area, she has been attracting attention with a proposal to eliminate property taxes. She was ready to support Thompson after hearing him in Indianapolis.

"I want to be part of his team," she said after his speech. "He's a pro-life, pro-gun candidate."

She also heard Huckabee. "Huckabee is probably more closely aligned with me," she added. But she thinks Thompson has a better shot at winning the prize.

Leaders among Indiana Republicans have been split among the top three and undecided. Romney has support from Terre Haute pro-life lawyer Jim Bopp and Secretary of State Todd Rokita. McCain got an early endorsement from Gov. Mitch Daniels. Giuliani has support from former Mayor Steve Goldsmith and Marion County Prosecutor Carl Brizzi.

But the undecideds or uncommitteds have included Sen. Richard Lugar, U.S. Reps. Mark Souder and Mike Pence, along with Bosma and Walorski. Some of them have been waiting for the next Ronald Reagan.

In the movies and on television, Thompson usually plays the part of a low-key, sensible leader in politics and government. Now that they have seen him in real life, Bosma and Walorski think he may be able to play that part on the presidential stage.

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