



Education chair draws fire from critics

by George Lauby (North Platte Bulletin) - 2/9/2017

Frank, somewhat coarse language a year-and-a-half-ago by Sen. Mike Groene has attracted widespread ire from critics, notably women's groups.

Groene's email exchange in July 2015 with a retired actuary in Hastings was widely circulated in mid-January to educators across Nebraska. It was part of a Feb. 5 article in the Omaha World Herald about Groene and his role as the new chairman of the Legislature's Education Committee.

In the old email exchange, the retiree, Bert Peterson, told the senator from North Platte that policymakers should do more about "our debilitating level of child poverty."

Groene, who had just finished his first term on the education committee at the time, replied by saying problems more properly lie with "the failure of lazy, second rate teachers protected by tenure."

The two went back and forth for 3-4 comments each over a couple days. Groene's combative style was evident.

The exchange began with an email to Groene from Peterson, who referred to the high-poverty Omaha elementary school, Wakonda, at N. 48th and Curtis. The school of about 340 students is one of the lowest achieving schools in Nebraska, according to state test scores.

In an attempt to turn things around, most of the Wakonda teachers and the principal were let go. The school day was lengthened another half hour. Twenty out of 24 K-6 teachers were new at the school in 2015.

Peterson told Groene the students failed the tests, not the school, principal or teachers.

“This failure was not the fault of the school, where the children spend only 10% of their lives from birth to graduation; but instead was from the other 90% of the child’s life which for too many of our children is in an environment that is not conducive to education,” Peterson said. He said politicians should do more to improve the home life of students, especially those with low incomes.

To which Groene replied:

“Sir: For 200 years we have been told that public education was the great equalizer. What happened? It was supposed to eliminate poverty.” He added, “Ever since the cowardly draft dodgers of the sixties hid behind education deferments and infested our public education system, our public schools have weakened. Do you really want to blame the kids for the failure of lazy, second rate teachers protected by tenure? The citizens have to take back their schools from the self righteous public school establishment. Blame the kids! What a jerk!”

Peterson replied at some length, maintaining that “facts confirm that educational performance is driven by poverty, not by teacher ‘laz[iness] or second rate’ ability.”

Groene replied:

“My job as an elected official is to protect freedom in America. You mistake America for a socialist country where the children belong to the government. I am not a politician, I never took money from lobbyists, or special interest, nor did I court a political party's support. I ran to protect children and families from socialists like you.”

Peterson said:

“There are hundreds of studies where money improved education -- free breakfast and lunch have done wonders for children who don't get fed at home due to parent income or neglect; English Language Learner programs that bring parents into the school to observe the teacher and learn how they can help their child learn; The North High School (OPS)

engineering program Skills USA & Destination Imagination programs, along with so many other programs.”

Peterson added that politicians need to find ways to improve the home. “But the best solution is not in spending in the schools, but instead in finding ways to improve the child's home life where he/she spends 90% of their life from birth to graduation,” he said. “That is your job and politicians’ neglect of that job for over a half century is flat malfeasance.” In reply, Groene said:

It is important not to “judge children's success related to their race or economic status.”

“I thank God that I never had a teacher in my life who justified their lack of ability to teach and told me as a youth that I had an excuse to fail because of my family’s poverty,” he said.

“Since the sixty's, we have allowed the animals (educators) to run the Zoo,” Groene said. “They took care of themselves. It is time for the citizens to take back their schools and remind the employees -- if you don't like it, Wal-Mart is hiring.”

Groene boiled down his educational philosophy:

“The facts are true,” he said. “Work hard, take advantage of a free education, personal responsibility, and respect others and you will not live in poverty, no matter where you started from. That is the message I tell youth. It resonates with them, because they do not hear it from educators. I tell them there are no excuses,” he said.

The conversation ended with “Bye” from Peterson, to which Groene replied ‘Bye. I just wish you meant it.”

The exchange has prompted more name-calling.

On Thursday, a group called “The Betsy Riot,” which formed in social protest to newly-confirmed Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, called Groene an “embarrassment, a nimrod, and a grease stain” among other names.

The Betsy Riot facebook page, which also claims President Trump is a fascist, shows a picture of a small poster of Groene with his quote about teachers attached to a light pole outside of what looks to be a school building. The building is unidentified.

Groene, who stays true to his convictions in the pressure of the Legislature, told the *Bulletin* he used exaggeration to make points – “a common debate practice.”

He also said the exchange was edited to leave out some of the names Peterson called him, and he’s deleted his copy.