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TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL

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Local Control -Opinion Editorial - For release Tuesday, September 14th, 2021

The state's mandates regarding masks and vaccinations are merely the headlines and excuses of the moment in an incremental dismantling of local control in public education – and other arenas -- that began decades ago, with the pace only picking up since.

Indeed, the latest top-down decisions from the governor and Illinois State Board of Education – and at times we've seen this at the federal level, as well – are just a continuation of the pattern of higher officials substituting their judgments for those of local school boards. That has included matters of curriculum, testing, student dress codes, accommodations, discipline, athletics, school lunch offerings, etc. “Unfunded mandates” – directives without the dollars to implement them -- have been a local rallying cry for as long as many of us can remember.

It is fair to ask: What is the point of electing local school boards at all?

We would grant that public safety is of the utmost importance – we want to protect our kids, employees and ourselves, too -- and that people of good intention may differ on the approaches to this pandemic and how best to protect the short- and long-term health and interests of our students. What we would not concede is that we must abandon our principles as a nation in order to preserve and protect the nation and its citizens. Among those principles is the rule of law.

Since March 2020, Gov. Pritzker has issued more than 80 executive orders regarding COVID-19 that have carried the force of law. The actual lawmaking branch of government – the Illinois General Assembly -- has been missing in action.

Lest anyone think our stance here is political, whether it's a Republican governor of Florida or a Democratic governor of Illinois making these unilateral calls, it is clear that this has become a bipartisan affliction. The aims may be different but the behavior is the same, and worthy of objection in either case.

Building a Better World. One Ram at a Time.

Indeed, it is impossible to believe that governing by executive order is what this nation's Founders had in mind when they were forming our nation. Not only have school boards been made irrelevant, but evidently legislatures have been, too. This is not what we teach our students in regards to how our republic is supposed to work. We may not always agree with the legislative outcome, but at least our time-tested processes have been respected.

Meanwhile, federal and state law are abundantly clear as to where the authority lies in regards to public education: "Parents have the primary responsibility for the education of their children," while other public and even private jurisdictions "have the primary responsibility for supporting that parental role."

Gov. Pritzker himself once subscribed to that view. As recently as July, he stated that "families should be involved in making decisions for their own families. And, school districts and school boards will make decisions for the schools within their districts."

Evidently, the Governor and ISBE really don't believe this.

Meanwhile, those of us who took the governor at his word are now dismissed and derided as an extreme minority, the enemies of science and compassion.

First, too many of our state leaders mistake compliance with agreement and consent. More of us than they apparently wish to admit have serious misgivings about how decisions are being made in Springfield.

As for the science, it – or at least the communication of it from the CDC and others – has been inconsistent, at best. Finally, who's really being punitive here – and to schoolchildren, not adults – when the consequences of not falling in line are to make high school diplomas worthless, or deny funding, or prevent students from participating in athletics? It is precisely because we *do care* about our young people that we are sparing them these threatened punishments.

In short, may Springfield forgive those of us who have come to view it as less a partner than an adversary in the education of our children.

To say this is a challenging and unprecedented time understates it, but the zig-zag nature of decision-making out of Springfield has made it far more difficult to

manage our classrooms, our schools, and our districts, creating unnecessary conflict in our communities. None of that serves our students – our reason for being – well.

It's not just about the pandemic. It's about *all* of the decisions that have been taken out of local hands by those who are all too distant from the resulting fallout. Enough is enough. Absolutely, it is the principle of the thing. Please, restore local control *and* accountability to our communities and those of us who know them best.

Respectfully,

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