

OPINION

DENGLER DOMAIN: Pharmacy

District 53 Newsletter: March 26, 2026

The legislature has finished week 11 of the session, we are busy working on bills sent over from the Senate and preparing appropriations bills for the final weeks of the session.

Nearly every year during the session we deal with legislation that to one degree or another seeks to end the requirement that local government notices be published in the local newspaper, opting for publication on local government websites instead. While discussing just such a bill with some of our small-town newspaper owners they made an interesting observation. Readership in that paper increased by 150% in just the last two years. More surprisingly, the increase was not older readers, it was younger readers. The publisher said their youngest subscribers tell them that in this digital world they are becoming overwhelmed by it, and that they appreciate the simplicity and convenience of having all relevant information in one, tangible place, their local newspaper. I'm heartened to hear that our local newspapers are experiencing this upsurge, and that younger readers are the ones making this connection about the simplicity and convenience of a local newspaper. I too find that in many areas the information we need is far too scattered on the internet. A newspaper becomes the "one stop shopping" venue for school, city, and county information along with other news of the community. I will continue to oppose efforts to remove the requirement to publish legal notices in our local newspapers.

The latest findings from the 2026 Cancer in Iowa Report offer encouraging information on health within our farming communities. According to the report from the Iowa Cancer Registry, Iowa farmers who participated in the long-running Agricultural Health Study experienced a 13% lower cancer rate overall when compared to the general population. While farmers are often on the front lines of environmental exposures, the study suggests that these exposures are not a significant factor in cancer rates. The combination of lifestyle factors, including lower rates of smoking and alcohol use, and the high physical activity required to be a farmer, contribute to these lower incidence rates for many common cancers like lung and colorectal cancer. Work will continue on these studies.

This week the House passed Senate File 2220, a bill that aims to improve how Iowa identifies and supports high-achieving students. Under this bill, school districts must use multiple data sources—including standardized tests, student achievement, cognitive and creative ability, and parent/teacher input—to identify gifted students. It also ensures that schools are identifying students across all populations, including special education and English language learners. School boards must develop an advanced mathematics pathway designed to increase the number of students who complete higher-level math courses in grades 9-12 and enable students to be prepared for algebra I as early as middle school and complete it no later than the end of 9th grade. Students who score at an advanced level on the statewide math assessment, or meet other indicators, are automatically enrolled in advanced courses. In Iowa, we want to maximize the potential of our students by removing barriers to advanced coursework and ensuring that high achievers are identified and challenged.

As always, I look forward to seeing you at the Capitol or in the district.



Rep. Dean Fisher R-Montour

Rep. Dean Fisher's district covers all of Poweshiek County and most of Tama County excluding the northeast corner.

Letters to the Editor Policy

Limit your submission to 400 words. The deadline to submit letters is no later than Monday at 10 a.m. for publication in that Friday's newspaper. Letters may be edited for libel and grammar. We reserve the right to shorten letters and reject those deemed libelous, in poor taste or of a personal nature. Letters must be signed with the author's real first and last name and must include a street address and a daytime phone number for verification. Individuals may submit no more than one letter per month. Send to: rmaharry@timesrepublican.com.

Private schools should be held to same accountability standards as public schools



Dr. Pam Vogel

Public education has stood as a foundational pillar in Iowa for almost 200 years. However, in recent years public schools have received meager increases in yearly state aid which fails to keep up with inflation. This, while the number of private schools in Iowa has grown due to the voucher program created by lawmakers in 2023. And almost half of Iowa's 99 counties do not have any private schools, so the hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars going to vouchers have no benefit to communities in these areas. Iowa is currently home to 325 public school districts

and 234 private schools accredited by the Iowa State Board of Education. Additionally, Iowa has 116 private schools not accredited by the State Board of Education.

All private schools in Iowa have the discretion to choose which students they admit and turn away those they choose not to admit. This admission process often means that students with disabilities or other special needs may be excluded, which may also unintentionally affect other groups of students, such as students of color. Our public education system takes all students, regardless of their background or educational needs.

To see the Traer pharmacy close is sad. Hopefully, it will see a similar outcome like the medical clinic with a new organization. It may have been years since stepping foot in this small pharmacy, but it still evokes memories.



Sean Dengler

After visiting the doctor's office, the pharmacy was a hop and skip away. There was no need to drive, unlike most places in the city. This easy setup made it worthwhile for the commoners. The only issue might be wandering the aisles temporarily as one waited for their prescription to be filled. The pharmacy was simple, provided a sense of ease, and helped those in need. The service and quality felt better than any Walgreens and CVS could provide.

While there were plenty of instances of waiting in the pharmacy for a prescription to be filled for me, some core memories are with my grandma, Mildred, having her prescriptions filled. Grandma would pick me up from Pied Piper on certain days, and then we would head down to the pharmacy so she could get her cocktail of prescriptions. Being in an older

generation can do that to someone.

On the days my grandma picked me up, it was my lucky day. I would rush into the middle aisle, squat down to the perfectly placed containers full of Frooties or Laffy Taffys for those sugar crazed kids. I would have to decide on what flavor I wanted. Was it going to be blue raspberry, cherry, green apple, or banana? It was a big decision. Frootie's were one cent and the Laffy Taffy's were five cents.

After making the excruciating decision of what Tootie Frooties and Laffy Taffys I wanted, I would happily go to the counter with grandma as Cindy would check us out. Her service was impeccable, and she was always so gracious. Grandma and I would then go on our way to her home. A few days later, grandma would pick me up from Pied Piper, and the process would start over again.

In my "older" age, I ponder why Traer seemed so perfect and what has changed. In a way, Traer had it all. The community has a grocery store, multiple gas stations, multiple bars, multiple restaurants, an eye doctor, a medical doctor, a pharmacy, and more. Unfortunately, this list has dwindled since I left town. While these services might cost slightly more in a small community, the ease

of convenience makes it worth it.

What is more frustrating is it does not have to be this way. Through an abdication of policies to help protect the commoner, and the allowance of consolidation to hollow out communities has been devastating. People are left behind because antitrust laws are not enforced, whether against the pharmacy benefit managers impacting pharmacies or the Robinson-Patman Act to help small grocers like Bobby's Grocery & BBQ. While it is important to note NuCara is facing a lawsuit from the state alleging NuCara owes them \$22 million, this situation was at no fault of the citizens of Traer and the other communities losing their NuCara pharmacy.

Let us hope Traer and the other communities find a replacement. This way people can still walk across the street to get their prescription. This can also be a place where not everything is about dollars and cents, but it is about forging memories with a loved one. Everyone deserves a shot, no matter where they are.

Sean Dengler is a writer, comedian, now-retired beginning farmer, and host of the Pandaring Talk podcast who grew up on a farm between Traer and Dysart. You can reach him at sean.h.dengler@gmail.com.

The MCO Medicaid mess – why Iowans shouldn't have to clean it up

There's a saying in business: "Where there's mystery, there's margin," meaning complexity, confusion, and a lack of transparency create profit opportunities for those at the top. Sounds a lot like the privatization of Medicaid, and Iowa insiders' plans to fund it.

Medicaid alone is complex. The combination of federal and state money pays for healthcare and services for hundreds of thousands of vulnerable Iowans — physically and intellectually disabled kids, veterans, seniors, and low-income families whose employers don't offer insurance. The list goes on. Medicaid members or their caregivers must also untangle a bureaucratic web of requirements.

In 2016, the Branstad administration, through executive order, added another layer of complexity by deciding to have private companies — known as Managed Care Organizations, or MCOs - manage Medicaid. It'll save money, they said. It'll improve care, they said. A decade later, we know that's not true.

I sounded the alarm in 2021 with a comprehensive



Rob Sand

review of healthcare outcomes for Medicaid members, comparing the three years before and after privatization. It found a nearly 900% increase in illegal denials of care post-privatization, meaning MCOs told members they couldn't receive the care they were entitled to — care that your tax dollars pay for.

The report also outlines violations of federal and state law and failures to comply with the contracts negotiated with the state. We heard horror stories from members, particularly those receiving home-based services, left in their beds, and forced to go without baths and wound care.

First and foremost, this is morally and ethically wrong. Companies legally obligated to protect Iowans shouldn't put them at risk. They also shouldn't rip off taxpayers who trust that their money is being used to help their neighbors as intended.

This also increases costs for Iowans who don't even

use Medicaid. Most medical providers in Iowa will tell you they're spending more time and money just getting MCOs to pay their bills. That time (and sometimes, the salary of a new full-time employee) is something YOU pay.

The nonpartisan Legislative Services Agency estimates that the amount the state pays MCOs to manage Medicaid members' cases will increase nearly 90% this fiscal year, from nearly \$73 million in FY25 to \$135.5 million, even as the number of Iowans enrolled declines by about 6,300. If you break that down, the MCOs will pocket an additional \$329 per member this year.

Why the state is paying them more to do less is perplexing, especially when lawmakers are scrambling to cover a \$91 million Medicaid deficit this year, followed by a \$168 million shortfall in FY27. But again, that's a pattern: they doubled payment to Odyssey to run the ESA program while asking for nothing more in return.

Lawmakers' plan to bridge the gap would retroactively increase taxes on Health Maintenance

Organizations (HMOs), which most Iowans rely on for health insurance. It's no mystery who will end up eating the increase — Iowa taxpayers. Insurance executives estimate a family of four would pay an additional \$500 in premiums between now and December.

Enough already. With the state's economy ranked the worst in the nation and average personal income growth near the bottom three consecutive years, Iowans have less money in their pockets as it is.

Iowa taxpayers shouldn't be expected to clean up another mess created by a decade of politically motivated policies and reckless budgeting practices. They deserve transparency and leaders willing to shine a light on the margins and hold the MCOs accountable. The privatization of Medicaid should be reversed to save Iowans' tax dollars and reduce health-care costs, while improving the quality of care.

Rob Sand, Democratic candidate for governor, currently serves as Iowa's 33rd State Auditor.

graduation rates, and other critical information. This allows families and the community to understand how well schools are serving students and ensures that schools are held to a high standard of accountability.

Private schools not accredited by the state do not offer transparency or accountability. Without this, there is less certainty that students are being challenged academically or supported in their development, making it difficult for parents and the community to know whether students are advancing in their knowledge and skills each year.

Significant criticism has also emerged surrounding the voucher program's limited financial oversight. Distributing voucher funds begins with the state issuing the money directly to the parents, who are then responsible to trans-

fer these public dollars to the private school. This indirect method allows private schools to avoid showing the public how taxpayer dollars are being spent. This system has been uncovered in other states to reveal instances where public tax money was misused and diverted to personal or luxury purchases rather than educational expenses.

In the Iowa Legislature, Sen. Charlie McClintock, a Republican from Alburnett, introduced Senate File 2008, a bill designed to prevent private schools from mishandling public funds and to establish safeguards to ensure students in private schools receive a quality education. All private schools would have been required to adhere to the same reporting and auditing requirements as public schools. The bill aimed to guarantee fiscal responsibility

and safeguard against waste, fraud, and abuse.

Without transparency and accountability from all of our school systems, citizens cannot know if expectations for educational quality and responsible stewardship of resources are being met. Iowans deserve to know if every school, regardless of its public or private status, operates with integrity and in the best interests of students and the broader society. These high standards are essential if our state is to demonstrate our schools remain a foundational pillar in Iowa. How else will we know if every child receives the high quality education they deserve?

Dr. Pam Vogel is a former special education teacher and school superintendent in Iowa and Connecticut. She was an instructor in the superintendent licensure program at Iowa State University. She is a member of Iowa CCI and Public School Strong.

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