

The sad power of negative intent

In March of 2021, as USD 113 was struggling through the pandemic, individuals had different views and were polarized by that very difficult situation. In an article intended to encourage constituents to have open discussions while respecting the viewpoints of others, I shared:

"Assuming positive intent means that you interact with others with the belief that they have good intentions. This does not necessarily come naturally... Fortune magazine attributes the following to Indra Nooyi, former Chairperson of PepsiCo:

"My father was an absolutely wonderful human being. From him I learned to always assume positive intent. Whatever anybody says or does, assume positive intent. You will be amazed at how your whole approach to a person or problem becomes very different. When you assume negative intent, you're angry. If you take away that anger and assume positive intent, you will be amazed."

I have learned much during the 2022-23 school year. A painful piece of learning that conflicts with my desire to assume positive intent in others is the power of assigning negative intentions. This is the intentional fabrication of narratives that insert a negative-

based intention in order to elicit a perception of negative public opinion. This strategy can be an extremely effective tool, especially when used by individuals proficient in the exploitation of normal, honest citizens who believe in the goodness of others. It is often seen in politics. Unfortunately, this past year it has been employed at the local level.

A couple of examples of this are evident from a letter to the editor in last week's Sabetha Herald titled, "Don't Let USD 113 Fleece Kansas Taxpayers." Author Steve Sheldon asserts that USD 113 is immoral to consider using revenues provided for in the State's finance formula to educate USD 113 students. He did not explain that the current procedure in Kansas that all school districts follow is to use the money that is available to them through the finance formula to educate that year's students.

School districts, including USD 113 and all neighboring school districts, receive funding from students who have transferred out of district. This has been standard

operating procedure. Mr. Sheldon asserts that the closure of Wetmore is an attempt to be a "money-grabbing scheme" by USD 113. This is an example of assigning negative intentions to a group of volunteer public servants. This get-rich-quick

conspiracy theory appeals to a sensational sense of outrage. The factual version of the narrative does not achieve the desired level of rancor from the public.

If this process is an issue, it is not USD 113's issue, it is a State-wide systemic issue. Under this premise, all school districts are guilty of "fleecing Kansas taxpayers."

An additional example of attributing negative intent to a situation was stated by Mr. Sheldon, "Legislators obviously did not foresee a district taking advantage of this budgeting method by closing a school and pocketing the cash..." I believe that Kansas legislators are very astute. I believe it is possible that they considered this as a possibility and considered it similar to the consolidation incen-

tives contained in KSA 72-5141.

Why would legislators be willing to incentivize the closure of buildings? This leads to increased efficiencies that result in the State saving education dollars. A specific example of this was mentioned in the 2015 Kansas Legislative Post Audit Report on the efficiency of Prairie Hills, USD 113. It was reported, "Additionally [to the district saving money on the Wetmore closure], the state would save around \$129,000 annually in KPERS [Kansas Public Employee Retirement System] contributions if the district took this action."

Assuming positive intent serves a purpose. All individuals deserve to be treated fairly. We understand each other and communicate better when we approach each other with positive intent. Negative intent also serves a purpose. That purpose has a darker connotation. It is up to each of us to be good consumers of information. Please research statements that assign negative intent.

Our schools are full of good people. Our communities are filled with good people. Be conscientious consumers of information by being aware of how negative intent is ascribed to a situation in an intentional attempt to manipulate perceptions.

Notes from USD No. 113

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