

## Greg Johnson: Lawmaker resistant to school reforms

By Greg Johnson

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U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan asked one very pertinent, very important question when he visited Tennessee last month: “Where is our collective outrage over our nation’s achievement gaps and the fact that millions of our children still don’t receive equal educational opportunity?”

A basketball-playing buddy of his boss, President Barack Obama, Duncan praised Tennessee leaders for making “controversial but common-sense decisions” that are making an impact on educational achievement. Duncan said a “courage gap” and an “action gap” prevent ending the achievement gap.

Which leads me to another question: Why is state Rep. Gloria Johnson outrageously resisting any and all of the “common-sense” reforms Duncan praised? The Knoxville Democrat is troubled by testing, troubled by teacher evaluations and, especially it seems, troubled by Knox County’s latest common-sense reform, the approval of the county’s first charter school. Does Johnson suffer from a courage gap? An action gap? Or is she just a progressive resisting progress?

Johnson organized a rally in March aimed at amping up angst about vouchers and charter schools. She said expansion of vouchers and charter schools could be “the destruction of public education.” Last week, Johnson was at it again on Market Square prior to the Knox County Board of Education vote on an application by Emerald Academy to attempt to offer innovative educational opportunity to children without the means to escape flailing, if not failing, schools. The school board ignored Johnson, a public school teacher, and voted 7-1 to approve Emerald’s application.

Johnson is on the wrong side of public opinion. Nationally, according the Department of Education, from 1999 through 2012 the number of kids in charter schools grew from 300,000 to 2.1 million. The most recent PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, taken last year, showed 68 percent favor public charter schools, 67 percent favor charters in their community and 52 percent think charter schools provide better education than other public schools. But not Johnson.

Maybe she prefers kids unchallenged by pesky exams, taught by unaccountable teachers, stuck in place by geography, demography and socioeconomic status, all in the name of “saving public education.”

One of Johnson's potential electoral opponents disagrees with her regressive progressivism. Knox County schools are "better than ever" but can be improved by "adapting to the demands of the 21st century," said Republican Jason Emert. "The addition of Emerald Academy marks a significant shift from antiquated educational structures by providing a pathway for low-income families to break the cycle of poverty and give their children a strong future in an increasingly competitive job market."

Charters give disadvantaged kids and their parents hope for true change in our rapidly-changing world. Does Johnson not care about the achievement gap? Or is she just so stuck in the past her only outrage is against those with the courage to take action?



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