

The Sunday Times

Perspective

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SSD students and families of color deserve advocacy

The blowback from my criticism of the Scranton School Board’s collective and individual failure to acknowledge the impact of its consolidation plan on economically vulnerable students and families of color was predictable.

- I am a racist.
- I am an old, white, self-righteous liberal who thinks he knows what’s best for people of color better than people



CHRIS KELLY  
Kelly’s World

ple of color:

- I am an alcoholic. And a racist.
- I don’t know if 54 qualifies as “old,” but I am white and

a recovering alcoholic with a weakness for preaching. My high horse is always saddled up. I rely on friends to keep me from climbing up and punching down.

But sometimes, I gotta ride.

Sitting at the Oct. 17 school board meeting, I was struck by the absence of any discussion of the disproportionate burden the consolidation plan will dump on the dis-

trict’s most diverse, poorest populations.

No one on the board acknowledged or discussed this disparity, including Director Sarah Cruz, the board’s first and only Hispanic member; and Director Ty Holmes, the board’s first and only Black member. Holmes is also president of the Lackawanna County branch of the NAACP.

I did not and do not excuse

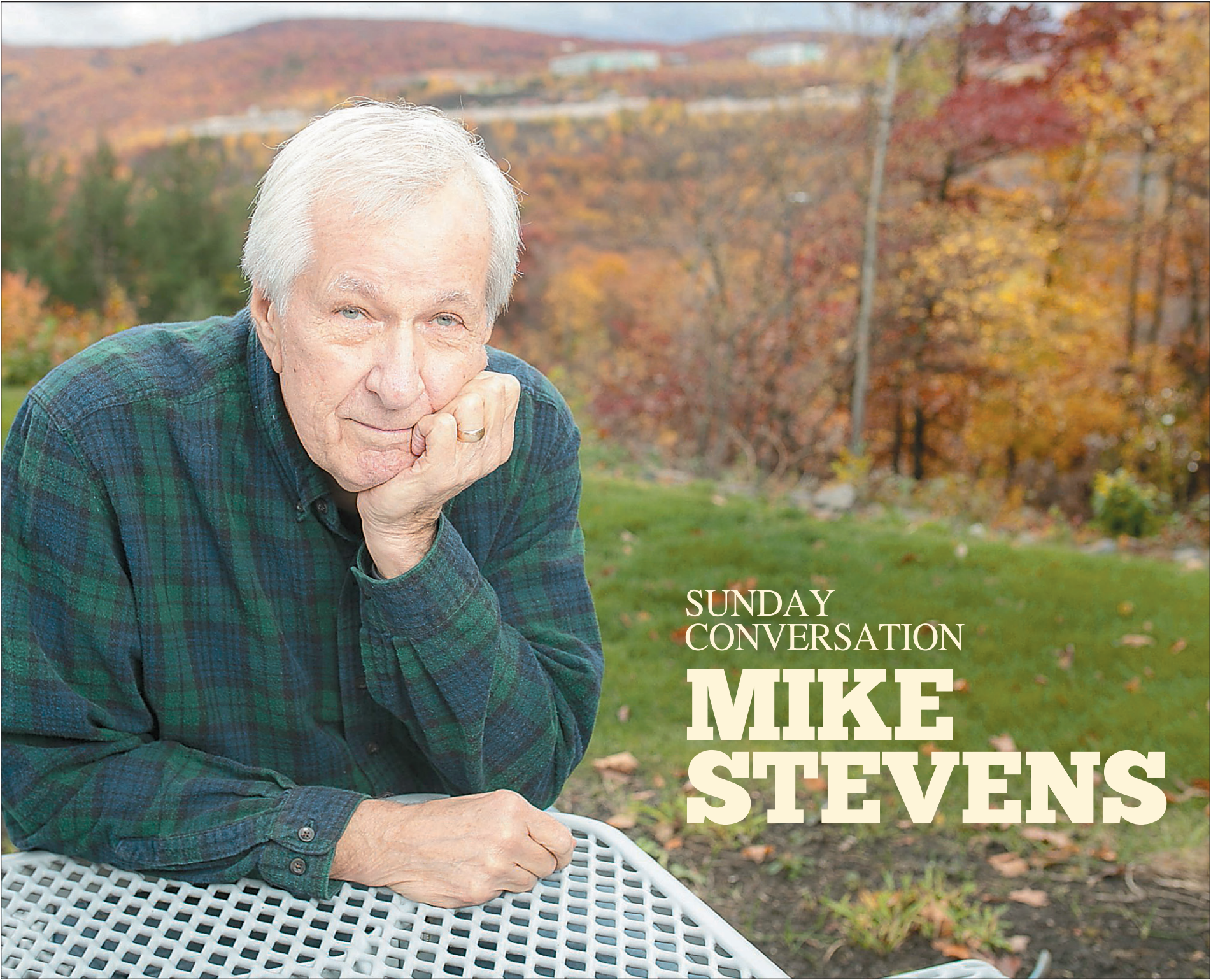
the seven white members of the board for failing to address the lopsided demographics of the plan. I did and do expect directors of color to speak up for students and families of color: They are blessed with a unique public platform for advocacy. So am I.

Nature abhors a vacuum. So does any community journalist worthy of the job. I spoke up for students and

families of color knowing it was likely to be unwelcome. Still, I hoped it would provoke a productive conversation about the consolidation plan’s most vulnerable numbers.

Instead, I provoked Holmes. When he responded with a letter to the editor that dodged my point and painted himself as a victim,

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WNEP-TV’s Mike Stevens at the news station in Moosic on Wednesday.

JAKE DANNA STEVENS / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

SUNDAY CONVERSATION

MIKE STEVENS

Mike Stevens is a familiar face along the Pennsylvania road. He grew up in Swyersville and began his career in broadcasting in 1965, moving on to television and WNEP-TV in 1975 where he later began the On the Pennsylvania Road feature. Stevens continues to contribute to WNEP on the Saturday morning “Home and Backyard” show and station features such as Photo Link Library and the “Stevens Says” blog. He was a recent guest on Times-Shamrock’s News Engine podcast, hosted by Ed Pikulski.

**News Engine:** We all have to start somewhere. ... One of the biggest stories you covered was also one of your earlier stories and that would be Hurricane Agnes. Did that have a big impact or kind of set the pace for your long career?

**Mike Stevens:** That’s hard to say. It was 1972. I had been in television for a while. But Agnes was a difficult story to cover, because there was so much tragedy connected to it. Not necessarily in human life but it was a disaster by any stretch of the imagination. I think it taught me to try and develop a human story. I ended up not wanting to come away with a fact-filled story. I wanted to come away with a story that told about someone’s loss, about how they love their home, the neighbors who were not coming

back, because they couldn’t rebuild. That’s where it began to take shape, you know, the human side of the thing. And I learned ... that everybody has a story to tell. It’s a matter of my finding it and then allowing you to tell your own story.

**NE:** You actually left the area for a few years before you found your way back to WNEP and that’s when you really focused On the Pennsylvania Road feature. You did something similar at the other stations that you worked at as you traveled around a little bit.

**MS:** I’ve worked in Florida for a while. ... And I went to Madison, Wisconsin. ... And then in Raleigh, North Carolina. So every town was different, every place was different, every type of story that I could do became a



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different type of story to tell. So when I came back here, I had all that under my belt. And in 1983, I came back here and started to just tell stories. I went around until I found a good story.

**NE:** As someone who’s worked in broadcasting and journalism for many years, I’ve often said that the worst part of this job is seeing people on what many times is the worst day of their life. But you found another path.

**MS:** When I moved out of hard news, I loved it. Fortunately, I’ve been at a position where the company let me go and do what I wanted to do. And what I really wanted to do was to go out and meet ordinary people. I want them where they say, “Come on, I have a cigarette lighter collection, I’m willing to show you.”

**NE:** You know, Mike, there are 100 journalists in Northeast Pennsylvania ... but there’s only one guy who does what you do.

**MS:** Maybe, maybe not. I think every reporter has the ability to do that type of story. But if you’re a reporter, you’re sent out

to do whatever, you know, a story about city council, or what have you. You don’t really have time to digress into other things. When we used to have Skycam, the main helicopter, the big one, I was stuck for a story one day. I went to the assignment desk. I said, “Can I take Skycam for half an hour, three quarters of an hour.” (They said) “Yeah, go ahead, take it.” And I took a photographer with me. We did two minutes on clouds.”

**NE:** The clouds story. I’ve watched the clouds story. You actually set it up that way. You notice that there was a beautiful blanket of clouds over the valley. And that was where that story was born.

**MS:** That’s what we need more of. We’re in such a hurry to go from point A to point B. And we don’t take the time to smell the roses, an old axiom, but smell the roses. And so we bypass all the stuff that’s really, really good. Like the clouds, you know, or the wildflowers. We’ve done stories on wildflowers, just growing in

the field.

**NE:** It’s obvious that you love what you do. But it’s just as obvious that you love who you do it for. And I’ve noticed a phrase that you use regularly. And that’s “dear viewer.” You genuinely appreciate the folks who view your work, don’t you?

**MS:** I do. First of all, because they’re my audience and one should always respect the audience. But because, also, they’re real people. They are people who are out there trying to make a living, trying to make sure that their families are taken care of, trying to make sure that they can get up and go to work every morning. But at the same time, they’re still the cigarette lighter guy, or the keychain guy. They’re doing these interesting little things. And I think to myself, you know, I bet you our viewers would be interested in somebody who collects salt and pepper shakers.

**NE:** I can’t tell if you find these stories by word-of-mouth tips, or just kind of wandering around the area. Can you share a little bit of this secret sauce and tell us how you come across your subjects?

**MS:** Well, it’s kind of a, it’s kind of a mix. Somebody will

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