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Right Thinking: It's time to cut our lottery losses

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Guest Columnist

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In politics, when you lose the argument, rather than admit you are wrong, you change the subject. This tactic is especially handy when you've won the big political battle to implement your favored policy. When it turns out that your policies have produced the precise results that your opponents predicted, you say we must get beyond the stale debates of the past and move on.

Those who pushed Oklahomans to abandon our thoughtful abhorrence for state-sponsored gambling and establish a state lottery are busy making excuses for the failure of their scheme. Oh, they brag that they have raised \$500 million for education in the seven years of the lottery's operation. What they don't tell you is that they predicted the lottery would raise more than a billion dollars by this fiscal year, and revenues, in fact, are going down, not up.

A look at the yearly numbers makes the lottery's failure even more obvious. Oklahomans were promised that the lottery would bring in \$150 million a year for education. The opponents of the lottery, looking at the experience of other states, argued that we would be lucky if it brought in half that amount. The lottery, in fact, has never brought in even that much, and, after reaching a peak of a little more than \$70 million a year, has fallen to about \$65 million for this fiscal year, and is projected to drop below \$60 billion for 2014. The verdict of the facts could not be clearer: The opponents of the lottery were right on all counts.

Now, of course, as do all managers of failed enterprises, the lottery folks say that with some changes, we can turn things around. They say the problem is we have required that too high a percentage of the lottery revenue go to education. If we increase the percentage of revenue going into prizes, we can lure more greedy and foolish people into trying for the big score and, ultimately, more revenue will be generated and so, despite the lower percentage, education will be better off.

Are they right? Who cares? The world has changed since 2004. Those who led the fight against the lottery are no longer the embattled minority; they run the place. Nothing has changed about whether the lottery is good or bad for our state. If you thought a lottery was an awful idea eight years ago, the only thing that has changed is that you were proven right and rewarded with more power. What was the point of winning of all those elections if we won't use political power to do what we think is right?

The time has come to abolish the lottery. Many, of course, will also argue that, while we perhaps should not have approved it, we can't afford to lose the money now. Nonsense. This year's state budget is about \$6.8 billion. Half of that, or \$3.4 billion, goes to education. The lottery revenue going to education, therefore, is only about 2 percent of the education budget. It should be relatively easy to make up the lost funding. In return, we will stand up for the principle that government ought not to exploit those too poor, desperate, or ill-informed to know they are wasting their money and instead should help foster the character of its citizens, not undermine it.

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