The Attack on Public Education

The Texas Senate passed SB4, a bill providing tuition tax credits to donors giving scholarships to private schools. This is a voucher, plain and simple. The bill passed 18-12 on April 20th, with local senator Charles Perry voting for the bill.

This comes along the heels of constant attacks during the 84th legislative session aimed at appeasing political campaign contributors, while simultaneously damaging the identity of the role played by society’s unsung heroes: Texas public school teachers.

Senator Donna Campbell has said, “Today we have a monstrosity, a monopoly. It’s called public schools.” Texas Land Commissioner George P. Bush stated“…when a majority of our students are trapped in schools that are underperforming, some schools don’t work and refuse to change- and that’s why we need school choice and that’s why we need it now!” Interestingly enough, it seems that the rich, descriptive terms such as “monstrosity” and blanket terminology which applies to the “majority” in a negative connotation seem to be what garners public media attention, regardless of its accuracy.

The 100% Rule

When did it become the norm to make anything less than 100% a complete and utter failure? When businesses- which public education opponents like to compare our public schools to so often- have a customer satisfaction or success rate in a category less than 100%, they aren’t touted as failures. However, when Texas public schools are under 100% in any category, opponents will claim that we need an overhaul of the entire system. For example, news media likes to grab onto quotes that state that public schools are clearly failing because there are 146,000 students trapped in almost 300 failing public schools. However, considering that 146,000 students is 2.8% of the 5,151,925 Texas students, it doesn’t take a mathematical genius to identify that over 97% of Texas public school students are not enrolled in “failing” schools. Likewise, 300 schools represent 3.5% of the 8,574 public school campuses in Texas, meaning 96.5% of campuses are not “failing.” These numbers, might suggest that there are continuing areas where public education can improve, but certainly don’t necessitate the need to completely trash an entire system which is serving so many successfully.

When the success rate for these schools is viewed from the standpoint of the fact that public schools don’t get to choose their student populations, but instead they take whoever walks through the schoolhouse doors and accepts the challenge to have success with them, the results are really amazing. Regardless of their ethnicity, economic status, or disability, all students find themselves welcome in Texas Public Schools. When coupled with the fact that schools have been funded by a system that has been found unconstitutional and plagued with inequities in the way districts throughout the state get funded, it truly becomes remarkable the job our Texas public educators have done serving the needs of all students. This accomplishment has been achieved in spite of being in a governmental system that refuses to close the Texas borders and
reduce the number of students that our schools annually pick up (a growth rate of about 80,000 students per year) without receiving additional funding aimed at educating students who show up to our campuses well behind their peers who have grown up in Texas public schools.

Why New Accountability Tests?

The first year of receiving results in any tested areas from the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) was 1993-1994. In that time period, the average passing rate on all tests through all grades tested was a 54% passing rate. In 2001-2002, the last year for that assessment, that percentage moved up to an 84% passing rate of all subjects in all grades tested.

When the state first began the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS test), the passing rate for exit level science test was 47% in 2003, a perfect argument for a failing school system. Jump forward to 2011, the passing rate on the science test was 91%. Exit level English language Arts rose from 61% to 95%, and exit level math rose from 43% to 90% during this same time period.

These are examples of what should be lauded as great news, right? Something positive has obviously been happening in public education. Not necessarily, particularly if you need an argument for how bad Texas Public schools really perform; hence, the need to adopt a new state assessment when results begin to go against your political agenda. Welcome STAAR assessment (and all the funding it takes to administer the assessments yearly), at least until the passing rate gets too high.

Some Negative Points about Vouchers

Voucher supporters have proclaimed vouchers to be the “fix-all” to a “broken” education system in Texas. However, there are several reasons why Texas residents should be wary to offer support for a voucher system in any form, which includes tuition tax credits.

First, there is the obligation statutorily that our state legislature has toward funding our free public school system found in the Texas Constitution, Article 7, Section 1. By diverting funds which would have gone to fund public schools and sending that money to fund privately operated schools, the Texas Senate has decided to take the authority to promote a voucher system into its own hands and ignore what they swore to uphold with regard to efficiently funding a free public education system.

Second, there has been no tie-in to accountability for private schools while they get to use public monies to run their organization. In contrast, public schools must meet various levels of accountability both academically and fiscally in order to provide transparency to the public on how they use the funds that they receive. There should not be a funneling of public monies to private organizations that are not held to the same accountability standards as public schools who receive those same funds.
Third, school choice already exists in Texas, a point contrary to what voucher supporters want you to believe. Students have the option to transfer from schools that have been identified as low performing as identified on the PEG (Public Education Grant) list. Also, the number of Texas charter schools and magnets already in place in Texas offer many options for students to allow for increased school choices. As a matter of fact, the 2013 Texas legislature raised the cap on the number of charter schools in Texas from 215 to 305 by the year 2019.

Fourth, the 1st Amendment of the U.S. Constitution prohibits the establishment of a religion. However, when public funds get used to fund private schools that have a religious affiliation, the separation between church and state can certainly be of concern. In addition, most people automatically assume that religiously affiliated private schools are only Christian in nature. However, if public monies went to fund a private Christian school, there would be no stopping the use of public monies to fund any other non-Christian based religious affiliation. Tax payers should have a concern with the use of public monies to fund religiously affiliated organizations in which they did not make a contribution toward on their own accord.

**Time to Stand up for Public Education**

Too often the news is dominated by the negative one liner that draws the most attention. Public educators do a service to the communities throughout Texas and deserve better treatment, recognition for a job well done, and respect for the calling they have taken up despite many odds set up against their success. Those odds are stacked against many public educators in Texas as they battle the results of a declining set of morally acceptable standards, increasing poverty in the lives of the children they teach, and an increasing mentality in the general public of being owed something rather than earning something.

The Texas Senate sent the wrong message to public educators when they passed SB4. However, the resolve of Texas public educators will continue to be a stronghold of what makes their calling so worthwhile. Their willingness to take all students, including our state’s most needy children, and give them opportunities to experience success educationally, and ultimately in life, deserves an appropriate level of respect that doesn’t identify their profession in terms that include the word “monstrosity.”

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