

# Talk

## about Today's Public Schools

**Editor's Note:**

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### ***State officials mislead the public about student funding and performance***

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In the last few weeks we have all heard reaction to the ruling in the school funding lawsuit. That reaction ranged from those clamoring for restoration of the cuts from the last legislative session to others who advocate delaying any work on school finance until after all appeals have been heard. I certainly have an opinion on this debate, but want to focus this column on another issue. The reaction that really bothers me is the one that says that while school funding in Texas has increased dramatically there are no substantial improvements in student outcomes.

This argument is simply misleading and untrue. On the funding side, data from the non-partisan Legislative Budget Board reveals that while total spending has increased between 2004 and 2013, inflation-adjusted spending has virtually flat lined. In other words, taking inflation into account we only spend about 3% more now than we did in 2004. However, this does not account for the 70,000 or more additional students who have come to Texas schools in each of these years. So, spending on Texas public schools has increased 3% in the years we have added around 700,000 students to the system (an increase of over 16%).

Another way to look at these numbers is to examine inflation-adjusted spending per student. In 2004 we spent just over \$7,200 per student. In 2013, we spent right at \$6,400 per student – a DECREASE of \$800 per student per year!

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Further, these data do not take into account the nature of the students who have come to our state in these years. They are more likely to be economically disadvantaged and / or limited English proficient than ever before. Students with these characteristics are more expensive to educate initially - this point was affirmed by Judge Dietz in his recent ruling.

On the outcome side of the argument, Texas student performance rose during the years in which we gave the TAKS exams on every test at every grade level. By May of 2011, over 90% of 11th graders had passed the four exit-level tests required to graduate. All of this happened while standards steadily rose.

Meanwhile, graduation rates for the class of 2011 (the latest for which data are available and the first class that was required to follow the more rigorous 4X4 graduation plans) rose to almost 86%. This number represents the all time high for our state and is tied with several others for third best in the nation.

Further, 2011 scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) demonstrate several highlights. For instance, Black, Anglo and Hispanic 4th graders were all in the top twelve nationally in math. Even more encouraging was the fact that every subgroup of Texas 8th graders finished in the top four states nationally in math. The NAEP scores reveal work to be done in reading and in closing the achievement gap across subgroups in our state, but the trend line is clear. Texas is gaining on the nation with respect to student performance.

So, here is the bottom line: those who say that school funding has considerably increased while student performance has remained flat have political agendas behind their statements. It is not because they don't understand the concept of inflation or don't know the research on student performance. They simply adjust the truth to match their desire to defund public education.

People who believe in the importance of public schools in our democracy have to push back against this misinformation. We can do that in two ways. One is to tell the truth to anyone who will listen about the great things going on in our public schools. The other way to fight this smear campaign is to aid the improvement of schools at every opportunity. Both methods are best accomplished by being involved in your local school. Consider mentoring or some other volunteer effort. Education is a labor-intensive business and we can always use a caring set of hands.

