

Talk

about Today's Public Schools

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Texas Supreme Court's funding decision keeps Texas schools among the lowest in the United States

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There's an old 1970s television commercial for oil filters that said, "You can pay me now or you can pay me later." In other words, you can invest a little money now to maintain your car, or a lot more later trying to fix the damage.

The Texas Supreme Court recently ruled that the current school finance system "satisfies minimum constitutional requirements." This decision is disappointing for the children of Texas. Further, the Court went on to say that the responsibility for our imperfect system rests squarely with the Texas Legislature and that they "hope lawmakers will seize this urgent challenge and upend an ossified regime ill-suited for 21st century Texas." We agree with this statement.

Although the system may meet the "minimum constitutional standards," it doesn't satisfy the standards of most Texans, and it certainly doesn't provide the funds necessary to prepare students to enter the 21st century workforce ready to compete with their peers on a global scale.

In a state as grand and glorious as ours, we like to boast about being the biggest and the best on a regular basis. Texas has a lot to brag about, but when it comes to funding our public schools, Texas should be ashamed. Regardless of how you crunch the numbers and adjust for cost of living or what year of data you use, Texas always ranks near the bottom nationally in funding.

In spite of poor funding, we have an expectation for students in Texas to graduate ready for college and career, and the vast

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majority do. In fact, Texas has the second highest graduation rate in the nation, 88 percent, and many school districts far exceed that number. As a state, though, we must ask two questions: 1.) For how long can our schools achieve more with less? and 2.) What will happen to the students who don't graduate?

How long?

When someone purchases a new home, there comes an expectation of continued investments for necessary maintenance and repairs. If the owner fails to make those repairs, the home may continue to provide sufficient shelter for a while; it might even seem those repairs are not necessary. However, the time will come when the home falls so far into disrepair that it fails to provide the adequate shelter expected of a home. We have reached that point with our system of school finance in Texas.

We can no longer fool ourselves into believing that just because many students seem to do well and graduate prepared for college and career, that we can sustain those results over time or that we shouldn't do even better. The two biggest cost drivers in public education are teacher salaries and class size. Due to huge cuts to public education in 2011, teacher salaries and benefits have not kept up with the cost of living, and the lack of funds have also resulted in larger class sizes. How many years can we expect our noble public school teachers to resist the much higher salaries the private sector has to offer? How long can we expect educators to remain in classrooms with increasing numbers of students, and therefore workload, for the same or less net pay? How can we continue to attract the most talented people into such an important profession in this environment?

What will happen?

While many students do well in Texas, we need a system that better meets the needs of every student, whether they are English Language Learners, economically disadvantaged, disabled, or gifted. What happens to the future of these students if they are not served by a system deemed just "good enough" for most? The future of our state depends on the answer to that question.

The Court said it was uncertain as to the correlation between more money and a better education. However, decades of other court rulings and legislative actions have built a school finance system based on that correlation. If there is no correlation between money and a better education, then why would some communities in Texas be required to send \$1.5 billion per year to the State for redistribution to property poor school districts through Robin Hood? Why is it that money matters in every other industry like business, professional sports, the military, and health care but



not when it comes to serving our children?

State Education Commissioner Mike Morath recently said that how you spend the money matters more than how much you have to spend. While how the money is spent certainly matters a great deal, the state and federal governments greatly limit how local district spend funds. Local discretion and flexibility is needed to meet local needs and to foster innovation.

The Court has said that this issue is one for the Texas Legislature to decide, and that means ultimately it is one for the people of Texas to decide. House Speaker Joe Straus recently issued interim charges to study components of school finance, and we applaud that action. Those of us who care about students, schools, and the future of this state have the responsibility of contacting our legislators to communicate that our standards and expectations for students and schools exceed the “minimum standard.” The bottom line is this – if we do not invest in our children now, we will pay for it in the future due to the enormous economic and social impact of a poorly educated society. We can invest now, or pay a lot more later – the choice is ours.

