

# Talk

## about Today's Public Schools

**Editor's Note:**

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***Vouchers by any other name are still vouchers; State leaders propose to give away public funds without any oversight***

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Do we want a system of education that is good for all of our children or one that is good for only a few?

Several school voucher bills have been filed in the current legislative session. This is not the first session where we have seen vouchers proposed and it likely won't be the last. The so called "Taxpayer Savings Grant" concept used in one of the bills is to take public funds and allow parents to use them where they choose. The bill could give roughly 60 percent of the cost of educating a student directly to the parent and the other 40 percent is counted as "savings" to the state which would supposedly generate a windfall of \$1.7 billion over five years. Not surprisingly, the bills are supported by some groups who are regular critics of traditional public schools.

**There are significant problems with legislators' calculations.**

First, the cost of running a school does not decline in a linear fashion if small numbers of students choose to leave. In other words, a class with 24 students enrolled costs essentially the same as a class with 25 students. These "savings" also ignore the negative impact to the students who remain in the public school.

Second, for most Texas districts, a loss of enrollment increases the district's wealth per student which translates to a decline

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in state per pupil funding. This does not even mention the fact that the “Taxpayer Savings Grant” bill specifically excludes the institutions where this “grant” money would go from the financial or student performance accountability that traditional public schools operate under. This would be a startling example of a fiscally conservative state giving away public funds without any oversight.

### **Invoking civil rights is a smokescreen**

We also see school choice advocates, especially those who would promote vouchers, speaking of the issue in terms that invoke the civil rights movement in our country. It is ironic that some of the earliest school voucher programs were created in the southern states in the 1960s for the express purpose of perpetuating segregation.

A recent article published in the *Huffington Post* speaks to the notion of school choice when is it used to encourage an exodus from public schools. The author makes the point that school choice actually disenfranchises the public. He states, “School choice treats parents as if they are the only stakeholders in education. They are not. We all depend on a society in which people are reasonably well-educated. This is why everybody votes for school board members – not just the people who have kids in school.”

Traditional public schools exist to serve the entire public. A system heavily influenced by choice indicates that only parents have a voice as they are the only people who control student enrollment or, perhaps better stated, market share. This message that the general public should have no interest or say in the schools is a dangerous one and seems to support the notion that goes something like, “I don’t have kids in school anymore so why should I pay taxes to support schools?” Obviously, we want parents engaged in our schools and their child’s education, and in Northside ISD we are very proud of our parent engagement.

However, education is the responsibility of an entire society – not just parents. The question of choice and vouchers really comes down to this: do we want a system of education that is good for all of our children or one that is good for only a few? The answer to that question at a policy level will determine the future of our community and our state.

