

WHITHER PUBLIC EDUCATION?

With a mixture of trepidation and excitement, I answered the call of the Texas Association of School Boards in the spring of 2005, and headed for Austin to testify in front of the House of Representatives Public Education Committee. I felt compelled to offer whatever arguments I could in support of public ed to the legislators, even while I suspected I was ill-prepared to deal with such polished orators and politicians. My hunch was correct; the experience was for me one of hours of tedium punctuated by brief interludes of stark terror. More in a moment about who attacked my positions and why; first, though, a few thoughts about what I see as good and bad in K-12 public education today.

First, the good news. In many ways, I for one believe public education is making strides in Texas. On what basis do I make this claim? Accountability, for starters. There are still many who believe that incorporating standardized testing into our schools has led to “teaching to the test.” There is truth to this claim, yet it is not necessarily a problem, in my opinion. While discretion will always be needed in determining the depth and complexity appropriate for each individual child, there must be some agreement concerning the necessary elements of a curriculum to be taught at each grade to prepare students adequately for the next level. That is the purpose of Texas’ approach to testing (known in its current iteration as the TAKS--Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills); namely, to determine whether each and every student has achieved at least minimal understanding that will enable him or her to grasp the next level of concepts. Related to this effort to ensure baseline competence are initiatives underway at the junior and senior high school levels to provide more advanced and in-depth academic

coursework. These challenge not only the best and brightest, but also set the bar higher for all students; available data clearly show that this does occur. Further, a wide range of extracurricular activities, particularly for adolescents, is not just beneficial, but quite likely essential. Everything from music to athletics, ROTC, agriculture and other career and technology outlets give kids the opportunity to challenge themselves outside the classroom. These types of activities also keep teens occupied between the crucial hours of 3 and 6 p.m., when they are statistically most vulnerable (to crime, accidents, and unplanned pregnancies). The benefits of extracurriculars are extensive, and, according to the University Interscholastic League, at least, very cost-effective. In fact, maybe some sort of involvement outside of academics ought to be required of all of our high school graduates in Texas.

What, in my view, still needs work? Although Texas mandates class sizes of no more than 22 students for each teacher at the elementary level (greater ratios are allowed as students reach higher grades), the data could not be more unequivocal that lower numbers of students per teacher yields better learning. At the high school level, block scheduling (essentially double class periods), especially in the areas of math and science, definitely facilitates understanding of difficult concepts. Unfortunately, lower student to teacher ratios in elementary schools and double-blocking of class time for selected courses at the secondary level both cost money.

This naturally leads to the issue of funding. There are those who believe we already spend enough on public education in Texas, even though we rank near the bottom among the 50 states in terms of our investment. Why does it matter? From a purely economic perspective, multiple studies (including one by the office of the Comptroller

for the state of Texas, and recently a similar effort in another state) demonstrate returns on investment of between four and five dollars for each one dollar directed to public education. This represents not only a better-educated workforce, but also one which is far less likely to be incarcerated or otherwise to constitute a drain on society's resources. Another justification for public education is that by inculcating a culture of learning in the next generation, we enable them to be more adaptable to the inevitable changes in the workplace by instilling confidence that whatever needs to be learned, can be.

On both sides of the issue of providing for the education of the populace are those who feel strongly that they know what is best. This was apparent when, after waiting some eight (!) hours in a crowded hearing room, it was finally my turn to testify. I told the legislators that I felt the most important component of education is parent, or at least caregiver, involvement. On one side of the issue (and indeed, the hearing room itself) were supporters of providing vouchers so that families can pull their children out of public schools and educate them either privately or at home. On the other were those who feel strongly that schools literally ought to take over the function of rearing children. I am comfortable with aspects of the former option provided it is accompanied by the same standards of accountability as are public schools, and I understand (and lament) that the latter has become necessary to varying degrees based on changes in society. In short, I'm firmly in the middle. I believe that excellent public schools involving parents and other caregivers continues to be a worthy, though still-elusive, goal...and yet, (as I kept asking myself as I dozed in the too-warm conference room) does the next generation deserve anything less than our best efforts?