

## Education in Texas

*By Bill Hobby*

The Austin Independent School District has been rated "unacceptable" by the Texas Education Agency- too many dropouts and too many low-performing schools.

Among the state's nine largest school districts, which educate 21 percent of its students, there were 42 low-performing schools. One hundred and six of the state's 6,803 public schools were low-rated, 47 more than last year.

In other words, many children are not getting their tax-paying parents' money's worth. Texas' greatest need now is better education. This was Texas' greatest need 100 years ago, 50 years ago, and 10 years ago, and it will likely be the greatest need 10, 20, 100 years from now.

Unfortunately, education hasn't been an historical priority in Texas and it isn't one today.

That's easy to understand, given the state's history and geography. In the east is the end of the great Southern forests and the fertile soil of the cotton belt. In the south, the brush country plains that supported the wild longhorn cattle that became the base of the greatest cattle industry in the world. In the southwest, the Chihuahuan desert crosses the Mexican border to define the landscape, and in the Permian basin covers some of the world's richest petroleum deposits. To the northwest, the High Plains sprawl down the Cap Rock and end in the rolling plains, providing vast expanses for growing grain and cotton.

It didn't require a great education to grow cotton, corn or cows. A college degree didn't help cut the East Texas timber, and the wildcatters who brought in the first big oilfields didn't learn how to do that in school.

Texans, like other Americans, have always paid lip service to education. One of the complaints cited in the Texas Declaration of Independence in 1836 was that Mexico had failed to establish a system of public education. The Texas Constitution of 1836 declared that "It shall be the duty of Congress, as soon as circumstances permit, to provide, by law, a general system of education."

Circumstances didn't permit for awhile. Texans didn't really think education was any more important than the Mexicans did. Some still don't.

Texas continues to underinvest in education and underproduce educated people. Texas ranks 39th in percentage of high school graduates and 33rd in percentage of college graduates.

This is true even though nearly every candidate for public office, from school board to governor, promises to do something about the sorry state of public education, usually by cutting taxes.

But some things really are better. We now grade our schools from "low-performing" to "exemplary". The Texas Assessment of Basic Skills tests that ensures a basic body of knowledge is covered. The no pass-no play rule says academics are more important than football. Increases in the state budget for public help.

But we also confuse tinkering and meddling with progress, we focus on reform rather than improvement, and we demand better management while we shortchange teachers and children.

For the past 50 years at least, two issues have consumed most of the hours spent by the Legislature on education-governance and school finance.

In its history, public education in Texas has been governed in just about any way imaginable. The state governing body has sometimes been constitutional, sometimes statutory. It has varied in size from three to 24 members. It has been appointed. It has been elected. It has had considerable authority. It has had limited authority. Most recently, the Legislature had to rule on how many meetings a year were required for the State Board of Education, with a strong preference for as few as possible.

Local control has always been important to Texans, and that fit right in with the move toward site-based management in the late 1980s. The Legislature in 1991 decided that a committee of parents and teachers should run each campus. Fortunately, the language in the law books has little to do with what goes on in a classroom.

School finance reform was a classic example of why, when someone wants to "reform" a system, you should put your hand firmly on your wallet. What that someone wants is to transfer money and power from one group to another. In the case of school districts, it was from the property owners in the richer districts to the school children in the poorer districts. Needless to say, this idea wasn't popular. Most people locate themselves nearest the best schools they can afford. They take poorly to the idea of having their property tax dollars subsidize a child in, say, South San Antonio.

From the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Rodriguez v. San Antonio ISD* in 1973 to the 1995 Texas Supreme Court ruling that the finance system passed constitutional muster, efforts have been made to arrive at some equity in the amount available to educate each student. The system isn't perfect, partly because it will eventually result in most larger districts being ineligible for state assistance, but it satisfies the courts for the moment.

In a century and a half of history, Texans have demonstrated that they are willing to do almost anything for public education except pay for it.

Despite biennial increases in state education appropriations, local taxpayers still pay more than half of the cost of education. Look at teachers' salaries, which average \$38,857 this year because of a well-deserved \$3000 state-mandated payraise. Not likely to attract the best and brightest to the classroom. If \$38,857 sounds ok to you, understand that a Texas family of four with an income of \$33,000 is eligible for free health insurance for their children.

The amount spent per student in Texas is about \$5,000, 31st in the nation and 12th among the 15 biggest states. Not coincidentally, many of those 30 states that care more about education have higher SAT scores. (Texas' students taking the SAT dropped two points on the math test this year, from an average of 501 to 499-the national average is 511.)

It's been most fashionable in recent years to advocate for vouchers as a way of upgrading education without spending more money on it. Ironically, Texas had a sort of voucher system, and not a very generous one, in the days of the Republic. In 1854, the Republic of Texas provided an allotment per student of 62 cents per year to private and denominational schools. There is no evidence that it worked well then and there is none that it would now.

Steve Murdock's recent demographic study, "Texas Challenged", shows the minority population increasing while the state's population ages. Some years ahead, we will have a minority population of old Anglos being taken care of by younger African-American and Hispanic minorities. These younger minority citizens, Murdock says, will be caregivers in nursing homes and hospitals, and they will be the taxpayers who support Medicare and Medicaid.

Look ahead, and you will see an unskilled, uneducated labor force, a larger prison population and growing welfare rolls-a greater gap between haves and have-nots.

Education has always been the great closer of gaps. It's been doing the job for years. As I wrote some years ago, the path from good intentions to good education is paved with difficult choices and hard cash.

The problem is that we have ducked the difficult choices and held onto the cash. We have chosen to criticize, audit, howl for reform, change management, castigate, carp and opt for the easy solution. Tax cuts are more popular than teachers' payraises. No wonder that school superintendents' salaries have gotten bigger as beleaguered school districts try to find someone willing to take on a thankless job with too big a task and too small a budget.

We get what we pay for. Houses, cars, c.d.'s, and groceries cost more today. So do private schools and private universities. Do we really think we can get the same public school education without spending more?

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