A RUSE, IS A RUSE, IS A RUSE

One of my duties as your Superintendent involves advocacy in support of your Independent School District and its students. Today, I am compelled to share my views with you on the topics of private school vouchers, school accountability ratings, and state testing, because remaining silent, out of fear of retribution, would be an act of cowardice. Recently, the Lieutenant Governor of Texas, referring to the upcoming (A-F) ratings of public schools, remarked “We finally have an accountability system, and boy, are they running for the hills...That's why we need school choice...Because no parent should be forced to send their child to...any school that they don’t think serves their child.” Well, I am not heading for the hills, and I pledge, with all of my ability, to do everything within my power to ensure your students and your school succeed under the rules and terms dictated by the state. The only hill I seek is the highest one to sound an alarm to the people of Texas that anti-public education forces are gathering in Austin, and I don’t think they come in peace.

The latest iteration of private school vouchers comes in the form of Senate Bill 3, which creates the vehicle for taxpayers to begin funding private education in Texas. Rather than call this effort a voucher program, which has been defeated in past sessions, we now see terms such as “tax credit scholarships” and “education savings accounts” being used to describe tax support for private schools. A voucher by any other name is still a voucher, and unlike the rose to which Shakespeare was referring in Romeo and Juliet, this ruse doesn’t pass the smell test. While I believe we can have an honest debate on the merits of SB 3, simply changing up the words to find a way around a wary public amounts to trickery. In fact, I intend to show that decades of manipulating the language to advance a political position has unfairly damaged public education and harmed children.
EDUCATION & TAXATION

Why should taxpayers offer a free public education and continue to exclude private education from the same tax dollars? That is a fair and fundamental question, and the answer better be good, or else we shouldn’t. If the current system is wrong, opponents should draw the sword of justice and behead it instead of just pricking it and then hiding and watching as it slowly bleeds out. If the current system is best for Texas and its children, the Legislature should put down the knife that threatens to carve away at your schools and get to the business of fully supporting and maintaining public education. The time to decide where you stand is at hand.

While a good public education prepares students for success in the workforce and/or readies them for the rigors of college, they do not persuade on the question. These things can be bought at some private schools, and frankly, they are not why public education exists. They are worthy goals and outcomes you should expect from your public school, but you must know there exists something far more profound about why our forefathers created public education. Let’s review.

On March 2, 1836, disaffected Texans and Tejanos living in Texas declared independence from Mexico. They cited, among their grievances, a lack of public education; “it [Mexico] has failed to establish any public system of education, although possessed of almost boundless resources, (the public domain,) and although it is an axiom in political science, that unless a people are educated and enlightened, it is idle to expect the continuance of civil liberty, or the capacity for self-government.” (Texas Declaration of Independence)

Four days later, the Alamo fell with no quarter for its defenders; however, as you know, Texas would succeed in revolution shortly after.
Later, framers would enshrine public education in the state Constitution where it now resides: “A general diffusion of knowledge being essential to the preservation of the liberties and rights of the people, it shall be the duty of the Legislature of the State to establish and make suitable provision for the support and maintenance of an efficient system of public free schools.” (Texas Constitution, Article 7, Section 1)

The omission of private schools is not a typo. There were private schools in Texas during this time, and the founders most certainly knew about them. Just by reading what they say, the answer to the fundamental question leaps from the page, and with a thunderous gavel, ends the debate. Now the question becomes more about why certain individuals feel entitled to your tax dollars to provide their children with a more private or religious experience in their education. I have no beef with parents who opt out of public education for whatever reason they may have at their own expense. They already have that right, but now they are arguing that their cause in having you pay for it is, as the Lieutenant Governor described, “the civil rights issue of our time.” Private school lobbyists argue that a private school might better prepare their children for the workforce or for college, but I say the founders did not grieve Mexico’s education system because they were missing out on good jobs and couldn’t get into college. They were thinking of the higher purpose public education serves which is essential to the preservation of a democracy.

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FROM AMERICA WITH LOVE

Just where did those rebellious Texans get their ideas about public education? In neighboring America, just a few decades earlier, these ideas were being advanced by its first three Presidents, George Washington, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson said it first in “A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge,” where he advocates for small public school districts, free for the students, independent of state control, and spread across the land. Washington, in his farewell address to the nation instructed us to promote the general diffusion of knowledge because he believed that if the children were to be assembled together in their education they would discover that there was no need for the prejudices one part of the country might have for other parts of it. John Adams said, “The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people and be willing to bear the expense of it...[schools]...not founded by a charitable individual, but maintained at the public expense of the people themselves.” Jefferson, arguing for local control of public schools to the exclusion of state management, warned that if our state governments controlled our schools, “they would be badly managed” and “depraved by abuses.” They understood that this new kind of government would need some kind of system of public education to preserve it. It was an age of enlightenment.

If the debate about public education today is reduced to slogans, tweets, and Facebook rants, I am afraid that the entire institution is in jeopardy of collapse, and we may live to see if the founders were right and the democracy follows. I place my faith in my fellow Texans and not with lobbyists and politicians whose agenda I cannot reconcile with our founding documents. I am left to conclude that using tax dollars to divide our children into private schools, home schools, and religious schools by their race, ethnicity, politics, wealth, and religion is not an American or a Texas value.
THE AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

We live in an age of accountability in public education which should have been good for children, but I think we're doing it wrong, and it is becoming harmful to them. When the current reform movement began several decades ago, the argument was that some schools just weren’t delivering results, and many who made that argument thought they were trying to make public schools better. Here’s the problem. Education was politicized. With each passing election, more and more local control of schools was stripped away by the state and federal government in the name of accountability. Today, we are finally at a point where it appears that accountability is nothing more than a contrived rating based on a test with the goal of eroding public support of its schools thereby advancing the voucher movement.

I think the people have given up so much control of their local schools to the State of Texas, that I'm not sure they should continue to be called Independent School Districts (ISDs). To meet the constitutional requirements of our forefathers, ISDs in Texas were created to provide a free public education to all the children within their boundaries, independent of state control; “all rights and titles to the school property of a district, whether real or personal, shall be vested in the trustees and their successors in office.” Now we have accountability laws that strip away all of that control the people had and replaced it with state closure and confiscation laws that allow the state to seize all of the property of the people's schools, using nothing more than a contrived accountability rating primarily based on children’s STAAR scores. The private lobby and its politicians have changed the very definition of your school. I never hear them refer to us as Independent School Districts. Doing so, might remind you that you were supposed to be in charge of them. Instead, they have worked hard to convince you that we are just failing state government schools. They are taking over your schools and acting like it was your idea. Think about it this way, Russia never overran a country that it says it wasn’t invited to invade by its people wanting to be freed from their failing government. You are being conditioned by the state to believe that public education is about a score on a state test.
Once achieved, the state begins picking them off one at a time; it’s a sport, and its season has opened.

Perhaps the most deceptive tactic used to argue for school choice involves the achievement gap. The research confirms, although we knew it all along, that there exists a direct correlation between public school accountability ratings and the surrounding poverty in the community. Because the state system is punitive in the way it calculates ratings based on STAAR passing rates compared by race, ethnicity, poverty levels, language barriers, and handicapping conditions, schools with diverse populations of these students are at a disadvantage. Even though poverty affects STAAR passing rates, it would be heretical for a public school to suggest that it cannot close the gap. The choice people know this, and they use it to convince parents in high poverty areas that if they could just send their children to private schools, their troubles would disappear. Despite heroic efforts by teachers, the gap persists in spite of the school not because of it, and STAAR only points out the problem; it offers nothing as a fix.

Not all achievement gaps among children are necessarily problematic. Since when did we decide as a society that all children must learn the same thing at the same time with the same success rate without regard to any variables among them? Since when did we decide that it would be a good idea to give a child with a diagnosed academic handicapping condition the same test as the valedictorian and expect the same results from both? The state definition of success, accompanied by a good accountability rating, requires that all students be the same, regardless of their individual differences. The one thing that can be successfully argued is that public schools have failed to eradicate individuality among children. Lobbyists demand respect for the individuality of their children while condemning public schools for not eradicating it in yours.
So, what’s in the school choice bill? For those parents who choose the private school market, STAAR testing and accountability ratings disappear completely. The proposed law stipulates that private, religious, and homeschools are exempt from state accountability. Satisfied customers will be the measure of their success. Additionally, private schools receiving your tax dollars will not be required to alter their creed, practices, curriculum, or admissions policies in any way. So, if you are a parent who wants to homeschool your children or send them directly to one of the many Christian, Jewish, or Islamic schools in Texas, the taxpayer will load a debit card in your name to spend as you wish. If you would like a subsidy to send your child to an elite private school where the tuition rates can exceed $30,000 per year, the taxpayer will give it to you. We haven’t even begun to think about all of the new private for-profit schools that might very well begin opening in every abandoned strip mall in Texas trying to make a buck off your child’s education. School choice is about more than an ideology or a philosophy; it is a real world transfer of your tax dollars to somewhere that’s none of your business, and your rights end when you sign the check.

If we applied the state and federal government’s education accountability regime to medicine, the cure for cancer would be to shame the hospital, slap the doctor, and give the patient a voucher to go somewhere that doesn’t test for that.
TAKING A STAND

The Governor, speaking at a rally for school choice from the steps of the Capitol on January 24th, said, “This is common sense; one size doesn’t fit all when it comes to education. Why should government force a child to attend a school that’s wrong for them?” My first answer is that it doesn’t, and my second answer is that public education wasn’t created to suit any one individual’s preferences about where he wants to go to school; it exists for a higher purpose, primarily, to prevent heads of state from exercising too much power over the people they govern. The lobby is trying to make the case that education is all about “me” and what “I” want when public education, by design, is about “us” and what “we, the people” need. The Governor is right about one thing, one size doesn’t fit all when it comes to educating children, which begs the question, What purpose does the state’s “one size fits all” test for all five million of them serve? To me, that makes no sense, common or otherwise.

While at the capitol, a private school lobbyist approached me and stated, “I hate everything you stand for” pointing at my name tag: Superintendent-East Chambers. I had never met her, so I only responded that most people get to know me before they draw that conclusion. So what do I stand for? I truly believe that a free public education is the bastion of democracy that protects the people from a return to despotic rule. I believe we should preserve it and protect it selfishly. I believe in capitalism and the American free enterprise system where trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit; and through competitive, transparent outsourcing, I oversee purchases in the millions of dollars to hundreds of those private businesses for goods and services related to running the school every year, not including payroll. I believe that these are your children and they come first, that this is your school and you own it, and it is your hard earned money and it should be spent wisely and deliver results. I believe there are two things in a democracy the people should never surrender – control of the military and control of the education system. They perish when they do.
William B. Travis drew a line in the sand at the Alamo to see who would stand with him and fight. All, but one, crossed the line. He was a soldier of fortune named Moses Rose. Most soldiers of fortune fight for the coin, not the cause. Even Davy Crockett tried to convince him to stay, but he would not make the stand; he left. As long as the institution of public education has to fend off attack from those who would rather promote private education at the expense of the people's schools, the Texas Revolution is not over. Until such day that the people take back control of their schools from the state, the Texas Revolution is not over. When we finally vanquish those who would squander what our founding fathers created, when we rid our schools of their tests used only to increase their control, when we dismiss their ratings designed only to advance their cause, then, and only then, will we have fought the last battle of the Texas Revolution. I should note that my inspiration for those last few lines come from John Quincy Adams arguing at the Supreme Court in 1840 in the Amistad case.

I was never more proud to be your Superintendent than on the day the lobbyist confronted me in her hatred for everything I stand for. At least I'm willing to take a stand, and if I have offended anyone attempting to erode the public's confidence in public education to advance a political cause, I make no apologies. If that lobbyist confronts me again, I hope I have a microphone because my response will be: Well, at least I'm not Moses Rose...and then drop the mic.
As a sign of solidarity in their national campaign each year, those who promote vouchers drape themselves with yellow scarves and wave them at their rallies as they demand that the State of Texas and Washington heed their demands. The movement did not originate in Texas, and I believe, it threatens the institution that made Texas great and has served us well for over 150 years. If they have their way, at some point, they will take down your Independent School Districts.

I believe, in response, all the public schools in Texas should start flying this flag in honor of the Texian and Tejano men and women who died in the Texas Revolution, but who sowed the seed of public education that continues to preserve the democracy they created.

Disclaimer: Just to be clear, the Superintendent is not advocating actual war or violence with this depiction. Texans know, that at the outset of the Revolution, Mexico demanded that the citizens of Gonzalez return the cannon it had given to them to fend off attacks from Native Americans. In response, they drew a picture of the cannon on a flag and invited Mexico to come get it. After a brief skirmish, Mexico declined the invitation. The Superintendent is simply drawing a parallel.

Go Bucs!
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