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EDITORIAL: A Peek Behind the Curtain of Political Rhetoric on School Choice, School Funding, and Local Property Taxes

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Couple things you should know related to your public schools, property taxes, and the politics surrounding it.

“School choice” sounds reasonable enough but it is nothing more than a happy, feel-good term serving as a cover for those behind the scheme to privatize your public schools. Other terms for “choice” include vouchers, scholarships, grants, and tax rebates.

The premise is that Texans should receive publicly funded vouchers so they may enroll their children at any public, charter, private, online, or home school of their choice, with no accountability, oversight, or transparency of those dollars once they are gifted to the recipient. Proponents omit from this sales pitch that a voucher will not provide nearly enough money to cover enrollment costs, it would not include transportation from poor neighborhoods, and that most private schools oppose the concept of voucher programs.

There are only two possible motivations behind this privatization effort: the first is a pure desire to provide better options for students *perceived* to be attending underperforming public schools; and the second is greed. Those in the first camp are ignorant on this complex subject. They’ve been duped by those who fall into the second motivation, which is greed.

These deceitful privatizers and their political allies in our state legislature do not care about what’s best for every student in Texas public schools. They have choreographed an admittedly brilliant effort to undermine and underfund our public schools to advance their agendas to privatize public education under the guise that they believe the private sector can do it better. Never mind that, by every measure, our public schools have never been more successful than they are right now. (Click [here](#) for sourced data.) A great read on this subject is [Good to Great for the Social Sector: Why Business Thinking is Not the Answer](#) by Jim Collins.

The truth is, privatizers do not want to pay taxes to fund public schools when their own kids attend private schools. In their tiny little wealth bubble, privatizers perceive no benefit from publicly funded public schools. Also, many of our legislators do not want to properly fund our public schools, not even to cover costs of inflation and 80,000+ statewide enrollment growth annually, because it is not popular among their voter base to allocate new money. I am convinced the intent is even more devious than that; underfunding our schools makes it more difficult for them to succeed, which fuels the privatization argument.

Further, many of these privatizers want to get their hands on some of the \$45 billion invested annually in Texas public education. There are profits to be made when our public schools are defunded and privatized. *That sounds like a bunch of money and leads some to perceive that our schools have plenty of money, but, to put it in perspective, Texas ranks near the bottom of all 50 states in per pupil funding. Click [here](#) for comparison of per-pupil funding by state.*



LOCAL PROPERTY TAX IMPLICATIONS

Rising local property taxes has been a hot political topic in 2017. Ironically, it is the most significant unintended consequence of Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick's refusal to adequately fund our public schools. School property taxes are rising because Patrick is stealing local dollars from local property taxpayers.

Here's how that works: when local property values rise, local municipalities and counties have the option to reduce their tax rates to offset the impact of those rising values on resident tax bills. Many of these governments do just that, adopting what is called the effective tax rate, meaning their taxpayers do not experience an increase in the amount of taxes they pay to those local entities even though values went up.

School districts, however, are handicapped by complex state funding laws and do not have this option. Most school districts rely on state dollars to fund some portion of their operating budget. In the 1980's, the state funded 68% of school budgets statewide. It funds just 38% today. When local property values rise, resulting in additional local school tax dollar collections, the state reduces its contribution to your school district by the exact same dollar amount, thereby reducing the state's share and increasing the local taxpayers' burden.

Your local school district receives NO NEW MONEY resulting from rising local property taxes. The additional dollars you pay on your property tax bill each year resulting from rising values are deposited into the state's general fund, which has been ruled and described many times as an unconstitutional state property tax.

Governor Abbott and the state legislature are shirking their constitutional obligation "[to establish and make suitable provision for the support and maintenance of an efficient system of public free schools](#)" and are robbing local taxpayers of their money to supplement its state budget. When we hear legislators cry for local property tax relief, as Senator Huffines did on Twitter following this summer's special session, but vote routinely against appropriately funding your public schools, they are not only opposing property tax relief, but are in fact advocating for local property tax hikes.

There are only two possible explanations: these elected officials are either dumb or willfully dishonest.

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