



8107

Beaumont Enterprise
Beaumont, TX
Circ 60318

SEP - 2 2003



Michael Sullivan

We must avoid school finance wrong course

AUSTIN — Across Texas, early morning commuters are beginning to see the familiar sight of flashing red lights on school buses and the warnings at student crossings. These signals remind us to ask ourselves if every child is out of the way.

Too bad school finance discussions for the past several years were not similarly equipped with warnings. We must proceed with grave caution.

Since the start, Texans have hated the so-called "Robin Hood" property tax scheme of public school finance. Even people living in "recipient" school districts say they do not like the system, recognizing its basic unfairness and inappropriateness.

But I have a nagging fear we may have allowed ourselves to be whipped into such wild-eyed frenzy of hating Robin Hood, we might inadvertently be trading something bad for something horrible.

Texans pay lower taxes than nearly everyone else in the nation. That is a good thing individually, and an even better thing economically. Texas is one of the most competitive economies in the nation, and indeed the world, because our taxes are low.

Second, our tax system is pretty well structured economically. Improvements could be made, but cautiously. Almost as important as how much is taken from the economy, is the manner in which taxes are levied. Our use of sales and property taxes is far preferable to income taxes.

Third, Texas' educational system, while needing improvement, is in far better shape than many other states.

So is our problem one of taxes or spending?

"The form of replacement taxation is far less an issue than the improvement in the efficiency of the schools," said economist Dr. Richard Vedder, an internationally acclaimed tax expert speaking before legislators about school finance.

We should heed his point: In this debate the first question shouldn't be where the money comes from, but how it is spent. We must ask fundamental questions regarding our expectations for education.

No sacred cows can be allowed. Everything should be on the table for discussion and dissection.

What is the purpose of public education? Better yet: what is the public purpose for education? For far too long, Texas has confused the two. Is it time to separate them?

Is it time we examine the programs and projects crowding the academic day? Maybe we should re-think the way we pay teachers, and even the qualifications for entering the profession? Does class-size matter? What do we expect students to know for graduation?

Why are barely 50 cents of our education tax dollar spent on classroom instruction? Are our schools operating at peak efficiency? Why do the highest-performing schools under-spend the worst?

Why are public schools rated "acceptable" when only 50 percent of students pass state assessments? Should students be forced to endure bad teachers and failing schools? Why can't we give school choice a chance?

Let the flashing lights of Texas' school zones remind us to proceed with grave caution.

Texans have the opportunity to choose a sensible vehicle for school finance that will drive academic achievement — not programs and politics — to the head of the class.

Guest columnist Michael Quinn Sullivan is vice president of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a non-profit research institution.