



180
60

How to Sink a School System

Gosh, we are having such a swell time here in Texas. Once again the speaker of the Texas House is under investigation by a grand jury. We have nothing against this guy personally, we're just rooting for an indictment as a matter of Texas tradition. This would make five out of the last six House speakers indicted for one thing or another, and you must admit, that's some record.

(As a matter of strict accuracy, I should note that there was one speaker in there who was not indicted, but rather was shot to death by his wife. However, she was indicted—although not convicted, because in Texas we recognize public service when we see it.)

Also adding to the *je ne sais quoi* at the old corral is our only governor, Cap'n Goodhair Perry. Cap'n Goodhair, who is from Haskell and went to school at College Station—both decidedly landlocked—has shown a nautical flair of late. Combining his hitherto unknown passion for the briny deep with the exigencies of the school funding crisis, Cap'n Rick decided the problem could best be resolved at sea. He decided to hold a seminar on school finance in the Bahamas, aboard a 54-foot yacht.

This "working retreat" over President's Day weekend was paid for by the governor's campaign and "private donations." Speaker Tom Craddick, who was unable to go because of recent neck surgery, didn't get the word about the "working" part, and his spokesman said: "He didn't feel like scuba diving with a neck brace. There isn't anything he could have done with that neck brace." Such as, for instance, discuss school financing.

Scouring the nation for the finest financial minds of his generation to go along on the retreat, Cap'n Goodhair took two major donors, James Leininger and James Nau, with wives, and Grover Norquist, the anti-tax nut from Washington. And there they sailed on the good ship *Voucher Plan*.

Actually, I just made up the boat's name, but it seems apt, since Leininger is a passionate advocate of school vouchers and has given literally millions to state

candidates in hopes of getting them to vote for that very thing. Brooke Rollins, head of the extremely right-wing Texas Public Policy Foundation, largely funded by Leininger, was also along.

Norquist is just the sailor you want when contemplating the disaster about to engulf the public schools. He is behind the national anti-tax movement, and 38 Texas Republican legislators have now signed his pledge to never, ever raise taxes, without exceptions, including for catastrophic emergencies. Norquist himself said last year, "We are trying to change the tones in the state capitols and turn them toward bitter nastiness and partisanship... Bipartisanship is just another name for date rape."

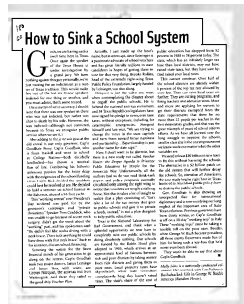
Now, I don't want to be alarmist, but there is a new study out called *Voucher Veneer: the Deeper Agenda to Privatize Public Education* by People for the American Way. Unfortunately, all the authors had to do was read think-tank papers and policy proposals normally circulated only among the right wing to notice that vouchers are simply a stalking horse. Not that it takes a lot of insight to realize that a plan consisting of, "Let's take a lot of the tax money that goes to public schools and give it to private schools, instead," is not a plan designed to help public education.

Texas is the National Laboratory for Bad Government, and think what a splendid opportunity we now have to completely ruin our public schools by doing absolutely nothing. Our schools are funded by the Robin Hood plan adopted in 1993, which arrives at an approximate level of fairness between rich and poor districts by taking money from rich districts and giving them to poor ones. Local property taxes have skyrocketed, while state lawmakers complacently brag *they* haven't raised taxes. The state's share of the cost of

public education has dropped from 52 percent in 1980 to 38 percent today. The state, which has an infinitely larger tax base than local districts, may not have raised state taxes, but they have sure by-God raised your local taxes.

This cannot continue. Over half of the school districts are already within 1 percent of the top tax rate allowed by

Texas Observer
Austin, TX
Circ. 0
From Page:
4
3/26/2004
93120





state law. They can raise local taxes no further. They are cutting programs, and firing teachers and administrators. More and more are applying for waivers to get their districts exempted from the state requirements that there be no more than 22 pupils per teacher in the first elementary grades, and that was the great triumph of years of school reform efforts. As we have all learned over the long struggle to improve the schools, smaller class size is the one improvement we know works no matter what the other variables are.

We need at least \$10 billion in new taxes to fix this without harming the schools. The alternative is a \$2 billion patch on the old system that will further decay the schools. So, attention all Americans, the case study begins right here in Texas, home of so much bad public policy: how to destroy the public schools.

Gov. Goodhair is also showing an unexpected flair for international diplomacy and is now rectifying our long neglect of the important area of Italo-Texan relations. Previous governors have been direly remiss, so Cap'n Goodhair is off on a 10-day "working trip" to Italy. These "working trips" must be taking a terrible toll on the poor man. Besides, when George W. Bush became president, all those snotty Easterners made fun of him for being such a yay-hoo that he'd never even been abroad.

They won't be able to say that about Cap'n Goodhair. ■

Molly Ivins is a nationally syndicated columnist. Her new book with Lou Dubose is Bushwhacked: Life in George W. Bush's America (Random House).

Texas Observer
Austin, TX
Circ. 0
From Page:
4
3/26/2004
93120