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Suing ourselves will never suit

By **BYRON SCHLOMACH**

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If ever there was doubt in anyone's mind that Texas can be a strange place to live, such reassuring notions should disappear with the latest school finance lawsuit.

Texas taxpayers are suing themselves in the West Orange-Cove lawsuit that goes to trial this week—the latest in a string of school-funding lawsuits.

Weird, huh?

Well, maybe that is a little harsh. Texans are not really so stupid as to repeatedly sue themselves to force themselves to pay more taxes to themselves. Nope, this is something only bureaucrats, elected officials, and inevitably, lawyers, could dream up.

What we have are 46 school districts (all taxpayer funded) suing the state (also taxpayer funded) for (you guessed it) more taxpayer money, and the lawyers are all paid with (get ready) taxpayer money.

It's not new; it happened for years in the so-called "Edgewood" lawsuits. What is different this time around is that these are not poor districts crying foul for lack of basic resources. These are rich districts simply crying for more, more, more.

It is understandable that people running our school districts want more money. The one thing they do well is spend your money. The United States spends more per student on education than any industrialized nation monitored by the international Organization for Cooperation and Economic Development. Texas, spending per student is higher than the U.S. average, after accounting for the cost of living.

If in today's dollars, Texas school districts had spent in the 2000-2001 school year what they spent in 1990-1991, Texas property tax payers would have saved \$5.4 billion dollars. On average, school property tax rates in the 2000-2001 school year could have been 40 cents per \$100 valuation less.

All levels of state and local government in Texas grew faster than the combination of population and inflation in the 1990s, but none so greatly as public schools.

So while we have been shoveling money into our schools, they have been suing us and complaining of a lack of funding. Meanwhile, test scores comparing Texas to the rest of the nation are mostly flat, except in the lower grades where it does not matter. Why? Simply: you cannot get a good job with eighth-grade skills.

We still fail to graduate too many of our high school freshmen, apparently hoping ninth grade skills are marketable.

West Orange-Cove ISD, the top litigant in the latest lawsuit pitting taxpayers against themselves, is apparently one of the best at spending a lot without producing discernable results. Two studies by the Texas Public Policy Foundation and one by the Texas Legislature ranked school districts in terms of efficiency. In a rare instance of near-agreement, each study ranked West Orange-Cove ISD in the bottom fifth of all school dis-





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tricts in the state. The legislature, s study ranked it near the very bottom.

The public school establishment has become extremely adept at spending our money to get more of our money so they can spend more money to get more money. A veritable army of public school lobbyists wine and dine your state representatives and senators, at your expense.

They form front-group after front-group in an effort to fool legislators into thinking a groundswell exists in the state to raise your taxes and spend a bunch more money on school administrators.

The latest example is the "Coalition to Invest in Public Schools." The organization consists of school district organizations, every one of them taxpayer-funded through dues paid straight out of school district budgets! Worse, each school district likely belongs to at least two or more of these organizations. Organizations whose sole purpose of existence is to lobby for higher taxes and more spending. Did your school board members mention that in the last election when they bragged about not raising taxes?

So until we find a better system of providing education, we can look forward to suing ourselves for more money for many years to come.

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