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## Why not choice?

### Legislature must justify poor education

**BY MICHAEL QUINN SULLIVAN**

One thing is clear about education in Texas: we are more than comfortable spending almost \$90,000 of taxpayer money to see a kid fail. But the thought of spending less money to see the same kid succeed is wholly unacceptable. It's really that simple, a hundred-grand per child for systemic failure.

On average, Texas spends just shy of \$8,000 per year per child in our government-run schools. When you consider most kids drop-out around the tenth or eleventh grade, the math is easy. Compounding our expensive taste for failure is a drop-out rate as high as 30 percent statewide, a number that reaches to 50 percent in some schools. The money expended could have been burned on the 50-yard-line of a school's carefully manicured athletic complex with similar effect. It doesn't have to be so. But don't hold your breathe expecting much improvement.

When lawmakers embark on their biennial pilgrimage to Austin in January, all will genuflect before the altar of education. While we commoners will be treated to a chorus of promises to "fix" education, the taxpayer-funded lobbyists representing school boards and administrators will conspire with teacher associations to thwart any meaningful change. They focus the legislature on noble-sounding initiatives, such as "across-the-board" teacher pay raises, regardless of a teacher's effectiveness in the classroom. They will claim they want to "protect" public education. Okay. But why not try to improve it, instead? A public school is considered "academically acceptable" if 50 percent of the kids cannot read or write, and 65 percent fail a math test. A 50 percent illiteracy rate is "acceptable"? A 65 percent failure rate in math makes a school "acceptable"? If 50 percent of cars blew up, we'd demand the heads of car executives on a platter. If you knew that 65 percent of the time you'd leave a restaurant with food poisoning, you'd never go out to eat. If we knew a particularly expensive medicine failed half the time, no one would take it. Yet we consider it acceptable to spend \$8,000-per-year-per-child for so many to fail? The solution offered by the public-ed establishment? More money, fewer questions.

But may heaven forbid we do something positive! Like, perhaps, give parents a choice. Why not? Let a parent choose between a school that fails to educate 50 percent of the kids, and one that might actually succeed with 60 or 70 percent of them. Would that be so bad? What does the kid – or the taxpayers footing the bill – have to lose? Not a thing. Are we so enamored with the institution of public education that we are unconcerned with how well the public is actually educated? Why do we refuse to unleash the curative power of competition – which has literally improved every aspect of life, from cars and





medicines to foods and computers – on education? Why does public education not deserve the same chance for systemic improvement? It's ironic that on the one hand the public-ed establishment goes to great lengths to describe the wonderful successes in our schools. But bring up choice, and they tell us public schools would be decimated; that parents would flee in droves.

Which is it? Are parents so happy with 50 percent failure rates they will stick with the public schools through thick-and-thin, or are they ready to bolt at the first opportunity? Most private schools operate for less than \$8,000 per child. Why not allow parents to use a portion of the tax dollars that would have been spent on their child's potential failure for a better chance at success? But don't worry: teacher groups, school boards and superintendents are ready to spend a lot of your tax-dollars this legislative session to prevent meaningful reforms empowering parents. They will accept almost anything as long as parents don't have true choice. When it is all said and done, our legislators will have to explain why they are willing to spend so much for a child to certainly fail, but are unwilling to spend less for the possibility of success. It is time for Texas lawmakers to give choice a chance.

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