



160 359 Our school financing due a long needed overhaul

By Byron Schlomach, Ph.D.

Guest Commentary

Are the children of Texas stupid or are our schools inefficient? If your answer is "neither," you're wrong. You have to decide. Which is it? Stupid kids or inefficient schools?

Why must it be one or the other? First, the United States spends more on a per-pupil basis than virtually any nation on earth. Second, Texas spends a little below the national average unless cost-of-living is taken into account; then, Texas spends a bit above the national average. Third, every nation that outperforms the United States in international academic comparisons, and for which there is spending data, spends less than we do on a per-pupil basis.

Only two conclusions can be drawn, and it's clear where the state's administrators represented in the school lawsuit fall. Apparently, because they say they absolutely cannot adequately educate children even at the planetary-high funding level they already enjoy, our children must be awfully thick. It is all that they can do to keep the dull-witted varmints corralled for a few hours every day.

Travis County District Judge John Dietz is right there with them. His ruling implies that when the legislature delegates in law the responsibility of actually educating children it is an "unfunded mandate." He makes it clear in his legal opinion on the school finance lawsuit that our funding levels are insufficient to educate the state's children.

They need lots of extra tutoring, summer programs, full-day kindergarten, much smaller classrooms, brand-new buildings, more books, and lots and lots of technology.

Of course, common sense tells most of us that the problem is less with the kids than it is with the administrators and our monopoly school system. Other multi-lingual countries educate their children better than ours for less money. There is no reason to believe that Texas children have more

difficulty learning than children in the Russian Federation, the Czech Republic or Hungary, all of whom outperform us in math and science.

But common sense apparently took a powder the day Judge Dietz ruled on school finance. Most of us know to be suspicious when someone demands more money in the name of some higher purpose, especially when there are financial benefits to be had. Instead, Judge Dietz swallowed every line the state's superintendents spoon-fed him.

The fact is we could triple the amount of money going to our schools and it would not be enough. Oh wait! We've done that already! From 1970 to 2000, inflation-adjusted, per-pupil spending in Texas' public schools tripled. If anything, the hue and cry from administrators has only gotten louder. It's like the spoiled child who knows that whining always gets him more goodies.

Apparently, planetary-high levels of funding are not good enough. It's just not enough that the student-teacher ratio has fallen from 24 to less than 15 over the last 40 years, and that simultaneously teachers ceased to outnumber non-teachers. More employees and more money, but our kids are no better educated.

Here's a little common sense: More money alone will not provide more education. Existing money needs to be spent where it counts, in the classroom, and parents need more choices. Maybe what the inadequacies of the school system identified in Judge Dietz's opinion really tell us is just how badly our money is being spent.

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