

Texas takes up school "reform"

By Bill Murchison

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Just after Easter, the Texas Legislature convenes in special session to address -- yes, again -- the state of public education hereabouts.

Our lawmakers have their eyes specifically on the overhaul of school finance: a really, really good idea, inasmuch as the old finance system has been partly invalidated by the state Supreme Court! But that's only our latest venture into educational improvement.

We've been "reforming" the public schools for two decades -- ever since Ross Perot, in early messianic mode, wrote and partly dictated a plan meant to make schools more accountable and, therefore, successful. More recently, our lawmakers have played with school finance (the Robin Hood plan for transferring big bucks from "wealthy" districts to "poor" ones) and established statewide uniform testing.

Now, as I say, it's back to finance, with -- possibly -- some reform thrown in. A fall date for school board elections is one notion that keeps surfacing, the idea being to encourage more voter participation. Hardly radical stuff, when the impression grows that some radicalism of the right sort would find a welcoming audience.

A researcher for the [Texas Public Policy Foundation](#) says that "Approximately half of all students in ... (Texas) universities and colleges need remedial classes. Meanwhile, 35 percent of entry-level job applicants do not meet eighth-grade skill levels on a competency test administered by Texas Instruments ..." Last year's National Assessment of Education Progress found just 31 percent of Texas eighth-graders proficient in mathematics, and just 26 proficient in reading.

Ross Perot, call your office ...

It's hard to be glib -- and it's no fun -- in terms of the sorry state to which public education has fallen in the whole United States, of which even a state so grand as Texas is only one part.

What strikes me as the underlying problem is that public education is so, well, public.

That is to say, it's government-owned and government-run. This government stuff used to work, generally speaking. That was back before the chief commitment of government was to the servicing of short-term voter wants and demands. Government wasn't yet an instrument for the leveraging of social change and economic redistribution. It was likelier to give voters what they needed (roads, postal service, meat inspection, sanitation, education) than to pass out goodies and social uplift to organized blocs.

A student could fail in the old schools. He can fail in the new ones, also, except that government doesn't let it show. For one thing, knowledge and performance standards are generally lower than 30 years ago. (One day last year, I discovered that not a single student in one upper-level class I teach had ever heard of William Jennings Bryan.)

Because government social policy requires every student to succeed, government practically forbids you not to procure a high school degree. That's if you stay in school -- something huge numbers of students don't do. Likewise, government education policy forbids even the most awful schools to fail absolutely. The teacher unions wouldn't like it if dues-paying members lost their jobs.

As a remedy, government-funded vouchers for students who transfer to private schools make absolute sense. As a political expedient, no way. The education unions won't allow in public education the sort of accountability the free market enforces in commercial situations: i.e., succeed -- or go out of business.

Yes, back to the Capitol comes the lawmaking power of the mighty state of Texas. To make a few deft procedural adjustments, lower some taxes, raise other taxes, then -- all too likely -- adjourn, leaving the big questions unsorted: How can teaching and learning standards be raised across the board?

In these self-esteeming times of ours, can we learn to penalize failure as well as reward success? Can we get across to students, in breadth and detail, that which they need in order to function in the most challenging moral and economic environment ever known?

Can we even suggest the necessity of knowing the name of the presidential candidate who bade us not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold?

A different kind of cross looms for today's luckless, over-patronized student: a cross of ignorance.

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