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Story: School choice saves students and dollars

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Every hour of every school day, 93 students drop out of Texas public schools. While a few of these students may move to a private or home school, the majority have abandoned school completely.

The Texas Education Agency claims a high school graduation rate of 84 percent, but most independent researchers report that only two-thirds of Texas students graduate high school.

The crisis is even worse in urban areas. Austin's graduation rate is only 55 percent, according to a study by the Gates Foundation. That translates into 15 dropouts every school day. In Houston and Dallas, more than half of public school students fail to graduate.

Fortunately, there is at least one proven way to increase graduation rates: school choice. Researcher Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute has found that school choice students exhibit higher graduation rates than their peers who remain in public schools, even when the public school students come from more advantaged backgrounds. More importantly, he has found that when parents have more choices, public school graduation rates increase as well.

Data from Texas support these findings. The graduation rate reported by San Antonio's Edgewood ISD increased from 59 percent to 75 percent since 1999 — the year a privately-funded school choice program was started there.

Since school choice would increase graduation rates for public and private school students alike, without costing taxpayers an extra dime, it should be a no-brainer. Unfortunately, teachers unions and public school officials don't see it that way. They fight school choice on the grounds that it takes money away from public schools, while failing to recognize the millions of dollars they lose due to dropouts every day.

If school officials are so concerned with dollar figures, perhaps they should spend their time improving graduation rates rather than opposing school choice.

Austin ISD lost almost 2,700 high school students last year, for reasons other than graduation. For each one, the district lost \$7,900 in revenue, totaling a whopping \$21 million in one school year alone. To put this number into perspective, that's more than Milwaukee's entire school choice program cost in its first seven years combined.

Not only do public schools lose out on revenue as a result of dropouts, but taxpayers are also shortchanged when they have paid to educate students who never graduate with a diploma. A Texas Public Policy Foundation study found that for each graduating class, Austin ISD spends more than \$130 million schooling students who never receive a diploma. Texas schools as a whole spend up to \$11.2 billion per graduating class in such a manner.

Too often in Texas, elected officials equate education with bricks and mortar and bloated bureaucracies. This mindset has produced a broken educational system that fails our taxpayers and, worse, our children. Parents deserve the option to take their tax dollars to the school that will provide the best education for their child — be it a public, private, charter, or even virtual school — especially if doing so results in higher graduation rates for all Texas children.

More money does not equal better achievement; school choice does. But money equals power, so it is no surprise that school officials object to the possibility of losing dollars through school choice.

They might have a legitimate reason to fear school choice if it would decrease per-student spending, but it wouldn't. A typical voucher amount is significantly less than the amount spent by public schools, so school choice actually increases per-student spending in public schools.

Fears of large overall cuts to public school budgets are also unfounded. Milwaukee has the largest voucher program in the country, yet the program costs only a fraction of the \$1.2 billion spent by Milwaukee Public Schools each year. And Milwaukee's public school graduation rate has increased significantly since the program began 16 years ago.

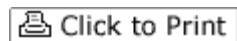
By introducing competition, school choice can — and will — increase high school graduation rates across Texas. When more students stay in school, public school budgets rise, and taxpayers get more bang for their buck.

Rather than running away from school choice, educators should embrace it for the dollars — if not the students — it saves.

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