

THE HEARTLAND INSTITUTE

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5,000 Parents, Children Rally for School Choice in Texas

Large crowd at Capitol requests legislative action

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Five thousand parents and children from across Texas attended a school choice rally at the State Capitol on February 7, asking legislators to allow them to use tax dollars to send their children to better schools.

Children should not be "trapped in schools that simply do not work for them," said Ken Hoagland, the rally organizer and spokesman for Texans for School Choice, a group that has been working on the issue since last November. "We must work harder to make the voices of these parents stronger in the legislative process.

"The rally was a turning point in our campaign, because it showed both legislators and members of the media just how serious, deep, and broad the desire is for immediate educational options for increasingly desperate parents of Texas's low income children," Hoagland said.

Inspired Choices

No specific legislation was announced during the rally, but speakers encouraged parents to stay engaged in their children's education and continue to demand the opportunity to choose their schools.

ABC News Correspondent John Stossel, the keynote speaker, praised the crowd for wanting better options for their children.

"Competition inspires people to do what we didn't think we could do," Stossel said. "If people got to choose their kids' schools, education options would be endless."

Bishop Gregory Aymond of Austin Diocese also spoke at the 30-minute rally, saying Texas's bishops support expanded school choice initiatives that will "increase racial integration and will help to reduce the inequities faced by students of various socioeconomic backgrounds.

"It is our hope that a fair and just public policy will empower parents to choose what is best for their children," Aymond said.

Critical Need

Father Jayme Mathias, president of San Juan Diego Catholic High School (SJD), a private school in Austin, attended the rally with 27 staff and students.

Mathias said in an interview for this article that he would like to see SJD available to more students through vouchers because the school is changing the community: 86 percent of SJD students transfer from public schools, 97 percent are minorities, 77 percent are on track to become first-generation college graduates, and 100 percent will graduate with an advanced diploma with 30 credits.

Texas law requires only 22 credits under its minimum graduation plan, and 26 under the distinguished plan. SJD also gives all students four years of corporate work experience.

School choice is an urgent issue for his community, Mathias said.

"In our [local] public middle school, only 23 percent of African-American eighth-graders passed the state-mandated Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills [test], and only 19 percent of Hispanic eighth-graders passed the

same test," Mathias said. "How can we talk about these young people positively impacting our society if four out of five students do not have the skills to succeed in the ninth grade?"

Increased Competition

After the rally, Hoagland said Texans for School Choice will support voucher legislation "aimed at low- and moderate-income parents in Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, Ft. Worth, and Austin." The vouchers, he said, should be distributed only to 5 percent of the eligible students, to leave "a healthy portion of funds with public schools."

Rabbi Aryeh Feigenbaum of Congregation Ohr Hatorah in Dallas told the crowd every child in Texas is important and will benefit from school choice, whether or not they stay at their present school.

Studies show "all children benefit from publicly funded vouchers," Feigenbaum said. "Healthy competition improves schools, produces better students, and raises standards."

More than 100 attendees came from the Jewish communities in Austin, Dallas, and Houston because they believe reaching kids in their formative years is critical, Feigenbaum said.

"Teaching a child is like ink written on fresh paper--the paper absorbs the ink and cannot be erased," Feigenbaum said. "What is imparted to a child is remembered forever."

Dropout Problem

Jamie Story, education analyst for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, agreed with Feigenbaum that choice helps all children.

"The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program has resulted in increased graduation rates for public and private school students alike," Story said. "And since the MPCP began [in 1990], the dropout rate in Milwaukee public schools has decreased by almost 50 percent."

School districts lose revenue for each student they fail to keep in attendance, Story noted.

"Every hour of every school day, Texas public schools lose 93 students primarily to dropouts," Story said. "In the last school year alone, Houston ISD lost more revenue due to dropouts than the entire Milwaukee school voucher program cost in its first nine years combined," she said.

Story concluded, "If educators are so concerned with school funding, perhaps they should spend more time reducing dropout rates and less time opposing school choice."

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