



Innovation needed to assist dropouts

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Albert Einstein once said the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. This sounds oddly familiar in the world of education policy. Throw more money at it and expect different results.

The public school establishment clings to the notion that schools can only get better if they get more money. Yet per student spending in Texas has almost doubled in the past 10 years - growing from \$5,282 per student in 1995-96 to \$9,629 in 2005-06 - with little to show for it in student achievement on top of the thousands of students dropping out of school entirely.

In fact, more than 131,000 Texas students did not graduate with their class in 2006. This statistic is even more appalling considering the fact that black and Hispanic students are much more likely to drop out. Broken down by ethnicity, 57.7 percent of black students, 54.6 percent of Hispanic students, and 75.9 percent of Anglo students graduated with their class in 2006.

A recent proposal from the Texas Education Agency to provide grants for dropout recovery pilot programs has drawn fire from the public school lobby.

Under TEA's proposal, the grants would provide funds to a variety of educational settings, including public schools, charter schools, universities and some private schools, if they do one thing: get dropouts, or those at risk of dropping out, back into school to work on their diploma.

This arrangement would not divert funds from public schools but establishes a bounty for bringing kids back to complete their education.

The fundamental question, then, is should the state put a priority on getting dropouts back into school by paying any educational institution that can convince the student to return?

For the public school establishment it seems the answer is a resounding "no!" These education groups show their true colors as they wield political power to protect their self-interest rather than meet the needs of students who public schools have failed to reach. Most disappointingly, many in the public school lobby seem satisfied if they lose funding because of a student dropping out of school but object to allowing those funds to follow a student to their classroom setting that rescues them from dropping out.

As Texas struggles with a dropout crisis, policymakers should also explore new solutions to catch those students who continue to fall through the cracks. Dropouts desperately need a second chance at an education and should be given a variety of options - be it in a public, charter, virtual or private school - that meets their individual needs.

The public should demand that the state do something to address the dropout crisis and reject those who defend and protect the status quo that has so obviously failed to meet this need.

Instead of dismissing dropouts as impossible to serve, we hope dropouts will be given the opportunity for this second chance through a variety of innovative approaches, and we hope public schools step up to the plate along with other educational settings as they compete to bring these students back to school.

If experience has taught us anything, it is that doing the same thing just isn't good enough.

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