

Texas Parents ‘Increasingly Desperate’ for School Choice

By Connie Sadowski published in the Heartland Institute School Reform News www.heartland.org

Five thousand parents and children from across Texas attended a school choice rally at the State Capitol asking state legislators to allow them to use tax dollars to attend better schools.

Children should not be “trapped in schools that simply do not work for them,” Texans for School Choice spokesperson Ken Hoagland, the rally organizer, said. “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’ low income children.”

Inspired Choices

No specific legislation was announced during the February 7 rally, but parents were encouraged 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, congratulated the crowd for wanting better options for their children.

“Competition inspires people to do what we didn’t think we could do,” he said. “If people got to choose their kids’ schools, education options would be endless.”

Bishop Gregory Aymond, of Austin Diocese serving 25 counties, also spoke at the 30-minute rally, saying Texas’ 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 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 minority, 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 only requires 22 credits under its minimum graduation plan, and 26 under the distinguished plan. SJD also gives all students four years of corporate work experience.

Students who attended the rally from Texas private schools didn’t attend the rally for themselves but to benefit their siblings, friends and neighbors who do not have access to quality, college-preparatory education according to Adan Nieves, a senior at SJD.

“I learned that many students and parents don’t have a choice about which school they attend. I went to the rally to support the students and parents of Texas who want to be able to choose a quality education,” he said.

More info and rally photos available at www.ceoaustin.org Connie Sadowski (connie@ceoaustin.org) directs the Education Options Resource Center at the Austin CEO Foundation. She is married with four children in Austin Independent School District--Elementary, Middle and High schools. "There are a lot of wonderful public schools and teachers in Texas. We commend them and want them succeed," she says. "Vouchers address the schools not meeting the needs of some children--to deny these kids a voucher is mind-boggling. It is time for our community to step up to the plate and demand options and for the education lobbyists to step back and allow parents to speak up and become advocates for their children."

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

“In our 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,” he 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 limited 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 that every child in Texas is important and will benefit from school choice, whether they stay at their present school or not.

More than 100 attendees came from the Jewish communities in Dallas, Houston, and Austin 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,” he said. “What is imparted to a child is remembered forever.”

Studies show that “all children benefit from publicly funded vouchers,” Feigenbaum added. “Healthy competition improves schools, produces better students and raises standards.”

Dropout Problem

Jamie Story, education analyst for Texas Public Policy Foundation, agreed.

“The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program has resulted in increased graduation rates for public and private school students alike,” she said. “And since the MPCP began, 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—said Story “every hour of every school day, Texas public schools lose 93 students—primarily to dropouts.”

But “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.

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