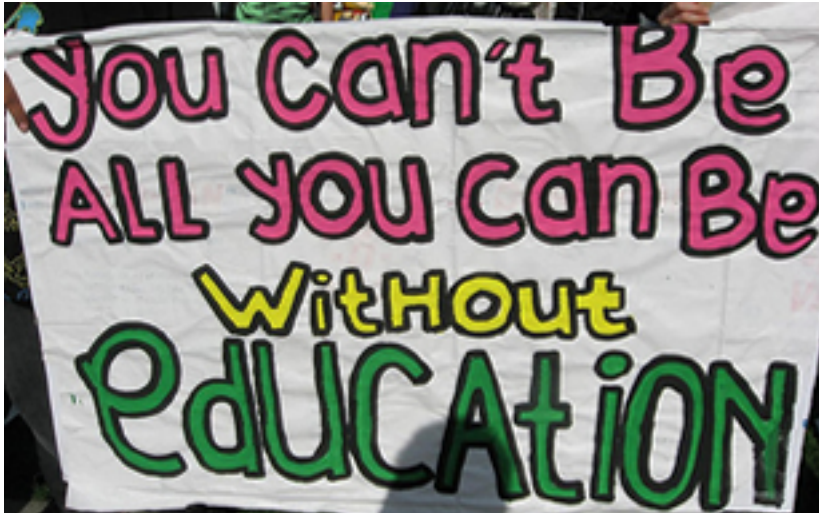


Assault on Public Education: “Enough is Enough”

Written by Eryn Roberts

Thursday, 17 November 2011 12:03



Houston-area legislators, parents and community leaders congregated at an exhibit highlighting Houston’s 175-year history of public education at the Willow Street Pump Station on Saturday to protest the Texas Legislature’s assault on public education with approximately \$5 billion in cuts.

The \$4 billion cut in state funding and the \$1 billion cut in public education grants mean fewer teachers, larger class sizes, eliminated bus routes, cuts to extracurricular activities, fewer and older supplies and for the first time in Texas history, unfunded enrollment growth.

“As bad as things were this school year, put your seatbelt on, because you’re going to feel the effects even more when children start school in August,” said state Sen. Rodney Ellis, D-Houston, who organized the event.

This school year, Houston ISD alone has seen a 51 percent increase in class size waivers, and

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6,500 class size waivers have been requested across the state. That’s only for Kindergarten through 4th grade. For grade levels above that, you don’t need state permission to have classes any size that you want.

The Republican supermajority in the Texas Legislature says money doesn’t matter, class size doesn’t matter, but “classroom size does matter, effective teachers matter, intensive interventions for struggling students matter, and it costs money,” said Ellis.

“They tell us to stop talking about money, money doesn’t matter, you can put all the money you want in public education and you’re still going to have crummy schools,” said state Rep. Scott Hochberg, D-Houston, and vice chairman of the public education committee. “Well apparently money does matter. In the state of Texas, we break our schools into four categories in the accountability system. We’ve got exemplary schools, then recognized schools, acceptable schools, and then low-performing schools. The exemplary districts in this state have available to spend and roughly spent \$500 more per child than the recognized districts and roughly \$800 more per child than the low performing districts.”

Money doesn’t matter, yet the districts we brand as the most successful, have the most money to spend. Hochberg said this is especially important for low income students, which comprise approximately two-thirds of the state’s students. In exemplary districts, which have the most money to spend, about one out of six students are low income, and in low-performing districts, which have the least amount of money to spend, nine out of 10 kids are low income.

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“The leadership knew these numbers and they came up with a plan that not only cut, but cut those exemplary districts, the ones at the top with the most money, by only the same amount as the ones on the bottom,” said Hochberg. “They said to the ones on the bottom, ‘well we know you’re doing poorly, the heck with you, we’re going to take another \$600 out of your pockets.’”

This crisis in funding is so serious that school districts across the state, including HISD and Fort Bend ISD, are suing the state of Texas for failing to adequately fund public education.

David Thompson, a Houston-based attorney representing HISD and other school districts involved in litigation regarding school finance in Texas, said over 1 million children are involved in this litigation across Texas. Thompson said this is the 7th time in the last 30 years that litigation regarding public education funding has been taken to state courts. “The state is 1-5 going into their 7th game,” Thompson said.

Gov. Rick Perry, and GOP presidential candidate has loved touting the statistic this election season that with skyrocketing unemployment and dire economic straits, Texas leads the country in job creation.

This is true. A study done by Georgetown University in which they try to measure the educational needs for jobs likely to be created in every state showed “that the state of Texas leads the nation in one category, we lead the nation in jobs created that a high school dropout can handle,” said Hochberg.

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Ellis said the location of the meeting was chosen, “to ask ourselves if we are as committed to our future as our ancestors were.”

The exhibit “Educating Houston: 1836-2011,” hosted in a venue situated between the county jail and the University of Houston Downtown, could prove prophetic if we don’t choose to invest in public education. “With the massive cuts in public education,” Ellis said, “far too many people are going to end up in that county jail instead of going to a university.”

In a quip playing off of Perry’s recent gaff in a Republican debate, Hochberg said “there really were only three things that we had to deal with in this Legislature. Really, the governor needed to deal with windstorm insurance, redistricting, and he needed to fund public education. Oops, once again he forgot the third one.”

We need to make sure our children are not forgotten and hold legislators accountable for these cuts.

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HISD parent, Sue Dygard, said “a popular talking point among legislators this spring was the state needs to live within its means like a household budget and compromise while money sits in savings.” In a household you also prioritize when things get a bit tight. The state could have chosen to use the rainy day fund, but chose not to. They also chose not to sunset wasteful provisions like scores of archaic, preferential tax breaks in the Texas budget, Ellis said. The Legislature has made it clear that education is not a priority in Texas.

Ellis said “parents and schoolteachers ought to be raising hell from the rooftops and say ‘enough is enough.’”

“We all have a choice,” Dygard said. “We have the ability to stand by leaders who stand by our kids, and hold accountable the legislators who make these cuts.” Only eight percent of registered voters voted in this election, and that silence by the populous tells legislators that what they’re doing is OK. Things will not change until people make their voices heard at the ballot box and by voicing support for investing in children, and in public education. But right now, we’re on the track of choosing higher unemployment, higher incarceration rates, and a citizenry increasingly dependent on social services as an acceptable future for our children.{jcomments on}