

Texas: Laboratory for Lunacy

Charlotte, N.C.

Another bad idea whose time has come in the Texas Legislature is upon us. It's time to revive my old proposal that Texas be made into a national laboratory for bad government. Having a bad idea in your state? Come to Texas and see how it works out in practice.

Three strikes and you're out? Watch Texas spend more on prisons than it does on schools. Thinking of making your tax structure more regressive? Come to the Lone Star State and see how it's done.

The latest brainstorm to afflict our friendly pols in Austin is school vouchers. Consider the beauty of this nifty scheme as it might eventually be worked out under the guidance of the Texas Lege. To improve the public schools (I swear, that's how the advocates are advertising this lunacy):

- We give vouchers to all the students who are already in private or religious schools around the state. Right there, before anybody else even gets a voucher, we will have taken, say, \$1 billion out of the budget for our public schools. Shrewd move, eh?

- We also give all the kids now in public school a voucher, thus theoretically enabling these children to attend the schools of their parents' choice. Unfortunately, private schools might find themselves under no obligation to accept any of our kids; they could be rejected because of their religious affiliation, their disabilities, on the grounds that they're not bright enough, because the school administrators don't like their looks—any reason not specifically excluded by law.

The Texas Freedom Network, a normally sensible group of good guys, is running around like Paul Revere, trying to alert the citizenry to this dread downside of the school voucher idea. "Proposed voucher legislation would allow private schools to recruit the best athletes and students at taxpayer expense." Folks, we're talking football now! I knew you'd be concerned. *Quel* horrifying thought: The whole high school football tradition is in dire peril. Stop the madness now!

On a more sober note, the good private schools we'd all like to send our kids to already have waiting lists a mile long.

No public school kid is going to St. John's in Houston or St. Mark's in Dallas with a voucher clutched in his or her little hand; those schools cost \$10,000 a year, and our little school voucher won't cover half the cost.

Now maybe, just maybe, some upper-middle-class folks might be able to afford a fancy private school with a voucher to help, but working-class and middle-class kids are going to be stuck just where they always were. Why should we spend public money to help just that one thin slice of the population when it won't improve the public schools?

The rural kids are really going to get burned by this idea. As you may have noticed, almost all private schools are in cities. Hundreds of rural school districts don't have a single private school, but because of the way state education financing works, they'd still lose thousands of dollars from their budgets for the public schools without a single kid going to private school.

I realize this means nothing to our Legislature, but it should be mentioned that the whole idea is rankly unconstitutional.

All in all, this concept is so bad that it has an excellent chance of passing the Legislature. Much as we would like to help the rest of the nation by demonstrating once more just how stupid ideas work out in practice, couldn't we give this one a miss?

In case you're wondering who is pushing this dingbat notion, it's the religious right, the same charmers who helped elect the right-wingers who now grace the state Board of Education. If you haven't checked in on the state board lately, you really should. It's a lot of fun—fruitcakes unlimited, flat-Earthers, creationists, all manner of remarkable specimens. In fact, it's gotten so bad that there's even a bill in the Lege to replace it with an appointed board again.

You may recall that we've had this fight before. In keeping with my Theory of Perpetual Reform, I now favor an appointed board. Last time, I favored an elected board. What I really favor is the idea that no matter what we try, in about ten years, it's always a mess again and we need to try something else.

Speaking of matters educational, let me take on a sacred cow that is long past its prime: local control. Have you noticed that the people who consider local control of the schools a sanctified arrangement are the same people who are always complaining about how terrible the schools are? If local control is such a great idea, then how come the schools are so bad? Have we considered the possibility that maybe local control is the problem?

A truism of the everlasting education debates is that someone somewhere has already solved whatever the problem is. Someone somewhere is always doing a brilliant job of teaching physics to inner-city kids, or teaching music to a bunch of rural kids in the 4-H who have heretofore considered Loretta Lynn classical music, or getting bored suburban brats excited about Herman Melville.

The problem is that we can't seem to replicate the successes in the schools across the board because there is no across the board. Instead, there's local control. Sometimes it's superb, granted. But often, it's hopelessly knot-headed. Ask the folks in Dallas—they've had some lulus lately.

It seems to me just possible that maybe what we need to do is take education out of the hands of insurance salesmen, Minute Women and other odd ephemera of the electoral process and put it in the hands of...well, educators. □

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