



Texas Institute for Property Rights

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Texans Need a Sam Houston for Education

With the 2019 legislative session beginning, lawmakers from both parties have stated that a priority will be to reign in escalating property taxes, a large portion of which are used to fund government schools. Legislators recognize the fact that property tax reform and school funding are intimately linked. For example, Republican Representative John Frullo said, “We cannot have meaningful property tax relief without a reform of our school finance system.”¹ Democrat Senator Beverly Powell echoed this sentiment, “It’s time for a serious conversation about meaningful school finance reform that will reduce the burden on local property taxpayers and increase the state’s share of school finance.”²

Unfortunately, a serious conversation about meaningful reform will not occur because the members of both parties accept the same flawed premise. No matter what scheme they concoct, the result will be nothing more than a variation on the current system. And the controversies will continue into the future with only the details changing.

Funding of government schools has been a political controversy for decades, and that isn’t going to change so long as lawmakers, voters, and taxpayers refuse to address the fundamental issue—the morality of government schools.

Consider the fact that, while state officials loudly proclaim their desire to provide tax relief to property owners, nobody has talked about cutting government spending on education. Indeed, most officials want to increase spending.

That money must come from someone. If taxes on property owners are reduced, taxes will be increased on other Texans. It is a vicious shell game, in which some will pay fewer taxes and others will pay more. And, as is much more likely, while homeowners pay less in property taxes, they will pay more in sales tax, gasoline tax, or a tax on something else. They may save a few hundred dollars in property taxes at the end of the year, but they will be paying a few extra dollars each week when they go shopping or fill up their gas tank. A few dollars a week will be less noticeable and less painful than a bigger tax bill at the end of the year.

This is a classic example of bait and switch. Legislators will bait property owners with the lure of lower property taxes and then simply switch their tax burden to a different form.

We can’t have meaningful property tax reform without fundamentally reforming the educational system. But this is a conversation that neither Republicans nor Democrats want to have. Instead, both have embraced the premise that government must provide education, and so we are locked into perpetual political controversies over funding, textbooks, curriculum, and everything else associated with education. Why?

1. Kase Willbanks, “West Texas lawmakers prioritize property tax, school finance reform in upcoming session,” KCBD.com, January 4, 2019, <http://www.kcbd.com/2019/01/05/west-texas-lawmakers-prioritize-property-tax-school-finance-reform-upcoming-session/>, accessed January 6, 2019.

2. Anna M. Tinsley, “Lawmakers are heading back to Austin. Will you get a break on your property taxes?” Forth Worth Star-Telegram, January 4, 2019, <https://www.star-telegram.com/news/politics-government/article222996570.html>, accessed January 6, 2019.

We don't have perpetual political controversies over other services, such as auto repair, house painting, or dentistry. And the reason is, these services are provided by private businesses. Each of us is free to select the mechanic, painter, or dentist of our choosing. Each of us is free to select among many alternatives based on our needs, desires, and budget. But when it comes to education, most Texans don't have viable alternatives. They are forced to fund government schools. Most Texans can't afford the alternatives, and so, they have little choice but to send their children to government schools.

The reason for this travesty is, unlike auto repair, house painting, or dentistry, education is regarded as a right—it is something that one is “entitled” to by the mere fact that he was born. And, according to this thinking, others have a duty to provide that education. Others have a duty to pay for education through their taxes or they will be guilty of violating a child's “rights.” Fundamentally, this is the cause of the controversies surrounding government schools.

But if we reject the premise that education is a right, then we can begin to have a meaningful dialogue about reforming both education and property taxes. If we reject the premise that taxpayers have an unchosen obligation towards others, then we can begin to truly identify the best way—i.e., the moral way—to fund education. Anything less simply means a continuation of things as they have been for decades. It simply means more controversy and endless shell games of switching the financial burden from one group to another. It simply means that parents and students will continue to be denied meaningful choices and educational freedom.

Of course, calling for the abolition of government schools would not be politically popular. It would take an individual of considerable courage and principle to take such a position. It would take a true leader, someone who is more concerned with doing what is right than with political popularity, to advocate for educational freedom.

The Constitution of Texas protects the intellectual freedom of individuals—the freedom to worship as one chooses, to express ideas in both writing and in spoken form—without proscription or prescription from government. Yet, through government schools the State holds a virtual monopoly on the teaching of ideas. If we truly support intellectual freedom, then we must build a wall of separation between government and education, just as we have a wall of separation between government and religion.

The curriculum in government schools is chosen and dictated by government officials. The textbooks used in government schools are chosen by government officials. The ideas taught in government schools, and the vast majority of Texas schoolchildren attend government schools, are determined by government officials. Parents who disagree with those ideas often have no viable alternatives, even though our schools are a primary means for expressing and teaching ideas.

In 1836, Texans rose in defiance of the Mexican dictator Santa Anna. Among their grievances was the imposition of a State religion. Texans fought for the freedom to think freely. If we wish to honor their legacy, then we must fight for our freedom to think freely and teach our children the ideas that we believe to be true. We must fight to free ourselves and our children from the State's monopoly on education.

The only meaningful way to relieve taxpayers from the burden of government schools is to abolish government schools. The only way to achieve true intellectual freedom in Texas schools is to abolish government schools. Both taxpayers and students will benefit from true educational freedom. All that is lacking is the Sam Houston to lead the fight for educational independence.



The Texas Institute for Property Rights provides analysis, training, and resources for legislators, businesses, organizations, and property owners.

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