

# THE WOLVES ARE CIRCLING

*THE FIGHT TO STOP VOUCHERS IS NEAR*

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We know the fight is coming. The wolves of privatization have been eyeing Texas public schools for years, waiting for the right time to attack. And after losing his bid for the U.S. Senate, Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst has made the time right. Burnishing his conservative credentials after the defeat, Dewhurst affirmed his support for private school vouchers and appointed Sen. Dan Patrick, an outspoken voucher proponent, to the chairmanship of the Senate Education Committee. And Patrick was quoted in August as saying this:

“To me, school choice is the photo ID bill of this session. Our base has wanted us to pass photo voter ID for years, and we did it. They’ve been wanting us to pass school choice for years. This is the year to do it, in my view. That issue will do more to impact the future of Texas and the quality of education than anything else we could do.”

The Patrick appointment comes amid speculation that Gov. Rick Perry will designate vouchers a legislative “emergency” item, thus making it possible for legislators to vote on the issue during the first 60 days of the session. The Dewhurst, Patrick and Perry push to implement a private school voucher system in Texas is diametrically opposite the views of the 110,000-member Association of Texas Professional Educators. As stated in the ATPE Legislative Program, a statement of philosophy and legislative priority reviewed and ratified by a representative body of members each year, “ATPE opposes any program or initiative, tuition tax credit or voucher system that would direct public funds to private, home or for-profit virtual schools.”

It’s also against the tides of public opinion, as measured in the 2012 results of the annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll on education, released in August. According to the poll, three out of four Americans “have trust and confidence in the men and women who are teaching children in the public schools,” and 77 percent of public school parents would grade the quality of their oldest child’s school as an A or a B. If Americans believe in public schools and the teachers who work in them, why use time and money to develop a system that takes resources and students out of public schools? Voucher advocates will point

to the PDK/Gallup poll’s measurement of Americans who favor allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense: 44 percent, an increase from 34 percent in 2011. That’s an increase to be sure, but still less than half of Americans favor vouchers.

In an Aug. 22 post on her blog, education historian and advocate Diane Ravitch analyzed the PDK/Gallup poll results thusly: “My takeaway from the 2012 poll is that the corporate reform movement has succeeded in increasing support for vouchers, but that the American public continues to have a remarkably high opinion of the schools and teachers they know best despite the concerted efforts of the reformers to undermine those beliefs. This is an instance where evidence trumps ideology. The reformers have not yet been able to destroy the bonds between the American people and their community’s schools.”

The bond of which Ravitch speaks is at the heart of the voucher debate. Those seeking to privatize public education will dress vouchers up in all sorts of seductive disguises—“choice,” “education savings accounts,” “tax credits” and the “great civil rights issue of our time”—but they are really proposing a plan that eviscerates the fundamental role public schools play in a democracy. The beauty of the public school lies in its ability to welcome all with open arms. In essence, a public school is each neighborhood’s Statue of Liberty, welcoming children and parents. There is a beauty in each child on the block going to the same school. Their parents share a common understanding and community. As the world further silos itself into those who watch MSNBC and those who watch Fox News, those who are on Twitter and those who are not, we must fight to preserve our few common bonds.

We must also defend the idea of education as a public good rather than a commodity to be bought and sold. (An economist might quibble with this use of “public good,” insisting that education is more properly classified as a “merit good,” but that’s beyond the scope of this essay.) In considering the implementation of a voucher system, the Legislature is really considering whether the provision of education benefits the individual—requiring what The Friedman Foundation

for Educational Choice describes as a “decentralized system of voluntary exchange between parents and education service providers”—or something that benefits the citizenry. Before diverting funding from public schools, the Legislature would be well-served to examine the words of Texas’ founding fathers, who, in March 1836, charged the Mexican government with negligence regarding education: “It has failed to establish any public system of education, although possessed of almost boundless resources, (the public domain), and although it is an axiom in political science, that unless a people are educated and enlightened, it is idle to expect the continuance of civil liberty, or the capacity for self-government.” To advocate for vouchers is to say that your tax dollars should only benefit your individual child and that you have no stake in the success of your neighbor’s child or the child across the railroad tracks. But no man is an island.

The Association of Texas Professional Educators believes that one person’s success is inextricably linked to the success of another. In order to provide for the success of all, we must continue to provide all with an equal opportunity to achieve an exemplary education through well-funded public schools. Our school system suffered historic cuts during the 2011 legislative session, and we cannot allow the implementation of a voucher system to pull the plug on a school finance system already on life support. Nor can we allow our tax dollars to stop benefiting Texas children and start lining the pockets of individuals running for-profit enterprises.

Simple in theory (a “decentralized system of voluntary exchange”), a voucher system would be startlingly complex in practice. How would private schools receiving public monies be accountable to taxpayers? How could you truly measure the success of a private school, which—unlike a public school—can turn away an at-risk or special-needs student? In fact, studies of existing voucher systems in Washington, D.C., and Milwaukee have shown that “choice” programs often lack strong internal controls and that there’s no provable difference between the achievement of public and private school students.

Money- and resource-wise, who is going to ensure that vouchers are spent on education and not frit-

tered away on personal goods? Would ensuring that voucher dollars actually get spent on education not necessitate the creation of a massive government bureaucracy, contrary to the wishes of those who seek to dismantle what they call “government” schools? Would vouchers be available to students already enrolled in private schools, thus further draining state coffers?

Another question: Would the due process protections afforded to public school teachers—contract rights and protections designed to ensure continuity in children’s educational experiences—be extended to private school teachers if their employers are receiving public funding?

Adding to the complexity: What about children who live in remote areas, where few private schools operate? Geography limits their “choices.” What happens to the children whose parents are too strapped for time or too uneasy—due to language or cultural barriers—to participate in the “voluntary exchange”? Think of the child in your classroom whose parent skips out on parent-teacher conferences. Is that parent going to take the responsibility for selecting his child’s school? For far too many children, a public school is the one place where they can be safe and get a good meal. Public schools take care of those who aren’t old enough to fend for themselves.

A private school voucher system would—to borrow from the much-maligned education bill of our day—leave many children behind.

All of these questions will be hashed out in the months and years to come. Consider this public education’s wakeup call. Public education is far from perfect; as a democratic institution, it’s not supposed to be. It’s ever-changing, subject to the needs and wants of its constituents. And few without financial interests in standardized testing would argue that drill-and-kill is the best way to inspire a love of learning in children. But just because an institution needs adjustment, it doesn’t mean it’s time to give up on it. We must reeducate our families, friends and neighbors—our communities, our social networks—on the value of public schools. We must defend our schools loudly and proudly.

We cannot allow our schools to be swallowed by wolves with big wallets and dollar signs in their eyes. ☪

# GET ANGRY, GET INSPIRED, GET INVOLVED

IT WILL TAKE ALL OF US WORKING TOGETHER TO PROTECT PUBLIC SCHOOLS FROM VOUCHERS

## The duty of the Legislature, per the Texas Constitution

"A general diffusion of knowledge being essential to the preservation of the liberties and the rights of the people, it shall be the duty of the Legislature of the State to establish and make suitable provision for the support and maintenance of an efficient system of public free schools."

—Article VII of the Texas Constitution



## Why you need to speak up

"The most vocal education 'reformers' whose initiatives, financial resources and bully pulpits are crafting policy for K-12 education in the United States have no valid reference point in the realities of the public school experience."

—Cheryl Scott Williams, executive director of the Learning First Alliance, in the Oct. 17, 2012, issue of *Education Week*



## Are private schools really superior?

"Overall, the study demonstrates that demographic differences between students in public and private schools more than account for the relatively high raw scores of private schools. Indeed, after controlling for these differences, the presumably advantageous 'private school effect' disappears, and even reverses in most cases."

—*Charter, Private, Public Schools and Academic Achievement: New Evidence from NAEP Mathematics Data*, a January 2006 study by Christopher Lubienski and Sarah Theule Lubienski at the University of Illinois through the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education



# 55%

The percentage of Americans who oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense.

Source: The 44th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, published August 2012

## "Every neighborhood should have a reliable public school"

"Business leaders like the idea of turning the schools into a marketplace where the consumer is king. But the problem with the marketplace is that it dissolves communities and replaces them with consumers. ... The market serves us well when we want to buy a pair of shoes or a new car or a can of paint; we can shop around for the best value or style we like. The market is not the best way to deliver public services. Just as every neighborhood should have a reliable fire station, every neighborhood should have a reliable public school."

—Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*



## What is this really about?

"Proponents call vouchers 'the civil rights issue of our day,' but I suspect it's a cover for families already sending their children to private and parochial schools to get a tax break."

—Austin ISD librarian Sara Stevenson in "Vouchers hamper public education," an op-ed published Sept. 7, 2012, in the *Austin American-Statesman*

