

## **Invest in Kids, Invest in our Future**

For the past three years, I have traveled around this state from Lubbock to McAllen, El Paso to Houston, and Dallas to San Antonio, speaking on school finance in Texas. I have met with educators, administrators, parents, and business and community leaders about the state of education in Texas: our low teacher salaries, our low graduation rates, and our even lower SAT scores. We talk about what we want in education: quality teachers, small classrooms, technology, rigorous courses, and accountability. And we talk about the best way to pay for it: whether through property taxes, sales taxes, franchise taxes, sin taxes, and even the income tax.

But before a discussion about how to pay for good schools can have any relevance, there is a basic decision that we have to make as a state -- not as a school district, a city, or region -- but together as a state. That decision is whether we have the will to do what it takes to guarantee that every child in Texas receives an excellent education. Not just your daughter in Highland Park or your son in La Joya, but every child in every school in this great state. Once we make this commitment to our children -- regardless of the color of that child's skin, the name of his hometown, or the size of his parents' paycheck -- only then are we ready to decide how to make this happen.

I have found that Texans everywhere agree on this principle -- every Texas child deserves an excellent education. The next step as a state, then, is to create the system that guarantees this right. And that is the job of state government. Simply put, it is the responsibility and constitutional obligation of the state to provide the resources needed to educate your child in a manner that guarantees your child a chance to succeed. Many Texans feel betrayed when they hear that the state's contribution toward education is as low as 38 percent. But that will not change until we as a state decide that we are willing to raise and spend what is necessary to create the education system we all desire.

The Honorable Bob Bullock always said that you could not talk about education unless you were also willing to talk about finance. Currently, Texas ranks 50th in the nation in per capita spending and 41st in state aid per pupil. With such a poor foundation for education, it should not come as a surprise that Texas is 45th in the nation in high school graduates and 47th in average SAT scores. Although every Texan wants a prosperous state, with a good education system, and a first-class infrastructure, we will never get there with a value system that has us dead last in spending. If we want to be number one in education, we cannot be number 50 in investment. Dead last in spending means we will be and, in fact, are dead last in outcomes. No matter how you cut it, you get what you pay for. And with the limited amount we pay now, all we get is low graduation rates that will ultimately mean declining household incomes and a bleak future for all of Texas. The state demographer predicts if we do not improve our high school graduation rates, Texas household incomes will decline by \$6,500 by the year 2040. In other words, unless we invest now, we will all be making less later.

When combined with nationwide economic trends, Texas' current spending on education is dangerously low. The spread of technology and the Internet has made countries with strong education systems such as in China, India and Russia more accessible and cheaper for American corporations. Just as manufacturing replaced farming, we are now seeing technology replace

routine service industries that once employed bank tellers, telephone operators, travel agents, brokers and accountants. In the new knowledge-based economy our children will be required to be technologically savvy and compete for jobs that require analytical and communication skills commensurate with a college degree. Our low-ranking average SAT scores will not get us there, which presents a bleak forecast for the future of Texas. Simply put, companies will not locate to a state whose children do not graduate from high school, have few skills, and cannot perform well on the SAT.

For such a complex problem, the solution is quite simple. First, we must agree that every single child in the Texas deserves a top notch education. Second, we as a state must commit the resources to fulfill this promise. Finally, we must decide the best way to generate these resources and whether we need to reform our tax system, which provides the revenue for public education. Over the next months my office will present a monthly series on issues related to school finance that will examine Robin Hood, the state of education in Texas, the state of investment in Texas, our current tax system, and other tax choices.

After one difficult special session on school finance, Bob Bullock once said that “the true test for a great state or country is not its size or wealth...it is its compassion for others.” He was right. For me and my colleagues in the legislature, the test for each of us will be whether we have the political courage to act for all of Texas’ children and not just for those in our districts. I believe we have the courage and the will to act as one for a stronger Texas. Our choice is simple: Invest in Our Kids, Invest in Our Future.