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Scott Milder: Voucher programs fail everywhere they are adopted

SCOTT MILDER Guest Columnist

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Delivering the opening speech at an annual conservative policy conference in Austin, Gov. Greg Abbott declared that the school voucher movement was “on the threshold of success” after the March 5 primary.

Sara Diggins, Austin American-Statesman via AP

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Gov. Abbott, in your recent response to a letter from State Rep. Jon Rosenthal, D-Houston, **you rejected his plea** for a special session to address school funding, asserting that the responsibility for budget shortfalls in Texas is not your fault. You couldn't be more wrong, Governor.

As chief executive of our great state, you are constitutionally bound to support an appropriate, free education system for Texas schoolchildren, even though you abdicated that responsibility during the last legislative session when you sacrificed the well-being of our public schools on the altar of your government vouchers plan, also known euphemistically as school choice, parent empowerment and educational freedom.

Your speciously worded letter conveniently omits several critical factors impacting our education system. It attempts to shift blame for the state's failure to take action — your failure to take action — to fund our schools. The people of Texas are no longer willing to listen to your false facts.

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Federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds were indeed a vital lifeline during the pandemic, addressing unprecedented staffing needs and learning gaps during an unprecedented time in public education. These funds were never intended to be a permanent solution, and public school leaders were well aware of that fact. However, they were dependent on the funds while waiting for the state Legislature to allocate needed funds from the \$33 billion budget surplus.

School districts came to see that their trust in the state was misplaced when the Legislature, under your influence, failed to use any of the surplus funds to adjust the basic allotment to sustain necessary funding levels beyond the temporary federal ESSER assistance. Their expectations were reasonable, given the compression of the tax rate, increased homestead exemptions and ongoing double-digit inflation.

Your comments about districts hiring additional staff with ESSER funds fail to acknowledge the surge in educational and mental health needs created by the pandemic, which you and many others depended on our schools to address. Districts responded swiftly to these challenges, and federal funds provided the means to do so. However, these funds were always a stopgap measure with the expectation that state funding would follow to maintain these critical services when the federal funds were expended.

Your letter failed to mention that the state kept significant portions of the ESSER funding intended for schools. The state used ESSER funding to supplant state funding, further padding the state's coffers and starving public schools of critical financial resources.

While failing to allocate funds to support school districts still reeling in the aftermath of COVID-19, you supported legislation that imposed new unfunded mandates, which substantially increased the burden placed on our public schools. For example, while enhanced school safety requirements were necessary, they came with insufficient funding, forcing districts to stretch already thin budgets even further.

I remind you that public school funding should be robust and standalone, not contingent on the passage of government voucher programs, which, by the way, are the most liberal proposals ever dreamed up by a Republican or a Democrat. Unchecked gifts of public funds for individual benefit are unconstitutional, illegal, irresponsible and an unjust use of taxpayer dollars. You might as well offer state park vouchers so that we may apply them to our country club memberships. Country clubs are perceived to be better than state parks, just like private schools are perceived to be better than neighborhood public schools.

Governor, your current strategy of linking public school funding to the approval of these vouchers undermines the stability and predictability that our schools need to plan effectively. This approach holds public education hostage to political agendas, diverting attention from the pressing need to fund and support our schools adequately. If vouchers are good for Texas, let them stand on their own merit.

Furthermore, as seen in other states like Arizona, the proposed voucher system primarily benefits families already enrolled in private schools, diverting public funds away from public education. This would not address the needs of students in the relatively few underperforming schools (only 6% earned substandard ratings). In fact, government voucher programs have failed to improve education in every other state where they've been adopted. Vouchers are a flawed political initiative.

The long-term solution lies in the state's constitutional obligation to adequately fund public education. We enjoy one of the highest graduation rates in America, thanks to our dedicated educators, while ranking near the bottom compared to all other states in per-student investment, thanks to you. With a significant budget surplus, your additional unfunded mandates, teacher shortages and record-breaking inflation, it is imperative that we prioritize our children's education. Increase the basic allotment to reach the national average in per-student funding. Ensure that Texas public schools have the resources for students and educators to succeed.

No one is more committed to improving the educational experience in our public schools than our highly trained professional educators. If this is your goal as well and your motives are pure, it is incumbent upon you to work with our state Legislature to appropriately fund Texas public schools, independent of your politically motivated school voucher legislation. If it's truly good for Texas, then vouchers can stand on their own.

Texas school vouchers removed from bill; other education funding in limbo // via **WFAA** on YouTube

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