

https://wacotrib.com/opinion/column/school-choice-texas-vouchers/article_ec440bf2-788f-11ef-92ad-770a9fcd92ab.html

Ashley Bean Thornton: For the sake of our kids, let's forget about vouchers and fund strategies that are already working

ASHLEY BEAN THORNTON Board of Contributors

Sep 23, 2024



Shelly Ellis teaches fourth-grade students at Bement Elementary School in Bement, Ill., in this 2013 photo. According to U.S. News and World Report's "Best States" rankings for 2024, Illinois ranked No. 11 out of 50 in national reading scores. Texas was 41st.

David Mercer, Associated Press file photo

ASHLEY BEAN THORNTON Board of Contributors

I was interested to read Kent Grusendorf's piece on Sept. 17 about the supposed benefits of vouchers [**"Voucher push benefits public education"**]. Like Grusendorf, I want what is best for Texas kids. I disagree with him, however, about the path to that goal.

When I saw Grusendorf's assessment that "Funding is not the issue. Rather, it's how the money is spent," it reminded me of those beer commercials where they argue over "tastes great" and "less filling" only to finally enthusiastically decide, "It's both!" Yes, public schools, including Waco ISD, need more money. And, yes, we need to be smart about how we spend that money.

Our public schools are underfunded. Teachers and other school workers have been scrimping and stretching for years to "make it work," but now the rubber band of teacher patience is being stretched to the point of snapping. There's a big difference between 15 kindergarteners in a class and 20 or 23. There's a big difference between sending a student with chronic behavioral problems out of class to a trained counselor for help and sending that same child out of class to a low paid paraprofessional for babysitting. That's the kind of thing that is happening in our underfunded schools and it is hurting our students.

People are also reading...

- 1 Centex Roundup Week 4: Rockets pull off impressive upset of No. 2 Glen Rose**
- 2 Up in smoke: Hail Mary dooms Baylor in conference loss to Colorado**
- 3 Affidavits: Two Waco High students arrested on riot charges after cafeteria brawl**
- 4 Fetsch, Axtell blast by Crawford in wake of Leathers injury**

It may be true that too much money is going to administration/consultants — but most of that is because of an ever-increasing load of requirements that have been handed down from the Texas Legislature, not because of supposed mismanagement.

Grusendorf states, “Over the past two decades the Texas Legislature has increased funding in public education by more than \$23 billion. Texas education spending alone is more than the entire budget of most states.”

It is certainly dramatic to say that Texas’ education spending “is more than the budget of most states,” but it doesn’t really tell you much unless you know how many students you are serving with that money, does it? It’s also important to adjust for inflation.

So, at the risk of scaring folks off with a bunch of numbers ...

The total amount in the TEA budget for the 2023-24 school year — including all funds, local, state and federal — was \$10,950 per student. Minus the federal part, \$760 per student, we have \$10,190 per student.

That same number for the 2004-2005 school year (the closest to 2003-2004 I could find on the TEA website) was \$7,255. Minus the federal part, \$273 per student, that leaves us with \$6,982. Adjust that number for inflation to 2024 dollars, and it would be \$11,262.

So, if we compare inflation adjusted dollars per student, Texas is actually spending a little over \$1,000 less per student than we were in 2004-2005.

Does that matter, though? Do states that spend more money on public education get better results? Mostly, yes. The old cliché “you get what you pay for” applies to education, just like it does to most other things.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress, known as the “Nation’s Report Card,” is the best test we have for comparing student academic performance across states. According to the U.S. News and World Report “Best States” rankings 2024, Texas ranks No. 41 out of 50 in NAEP reading scores.

The top 10 states in reading, according to the NAEP, spend an average of about \$5,000 more per student than we do. It is true that Utah and Idaho beat us in reading scores even though they spend less, but they also have 29.1% and 35.1% economically disadvantaged students, respectively, compared to 63.2% in Texas. Long experience and a slew of studies show that the higher the percentage of students from economically disadvantaged families, the lower the test scores — unless you take effective measures. Those effective measures cost money.

Of course, funding isn't the only factor. It is always possible to waste the money you have. This brings me to Grusendorf's suggestion for what will help us improve: school vouchers.

I agree with Grusendorf that Waco ISD could be doing better on academics. I just don't believe vouchers would help that happen.

There are school districts in Texas which have just as high a rate of economically disadvantaged students as we do in Waco, but they are doing considerably better with their academics as measured by the STAAR test.

Brownsville ISD, for example, has about 90% economically disadvantaged students, the same as we do here in Waco ISD, but their STAAR composite score is a 49 compared to our 32.

They attribute their success to strategies such as strong pre-K programs; an extended school day with an academic focus; consistent use of data; rigorous, well-funded extracurriculars; and strong, regionwide collaborations that help kids, families and educators get the support they need.

We could and should be learning from Brownsville and from other districts which have been successful at serving economically disadvantaged kids.

Instead, we are futzing around arguing about school vouchers.

Grusendorf says he believes public school educators and school board members fear “school choice” (aka school vouchers) because they are afraid of the competition.

I don't blame anyone who cares about kids, and particularly low-income kids, for being afraid of school vouchers. It's not because of the competition, though. It's because we should all fear wasting precious resources on an idea that we already know doesn't work.

In study after study, vouchers have been shown to have no positive effect on academic achievement for economically disadvantaged kids, or really for any kids. Instead, they have been shown in states such as Arizona to be a budget-busting subsidy for people who have never even tried public school or who were already sending their kids to private schools.

Adequate funding for public schools and spending our money wisely are both important.

Let's not throw our good money after the bad money that other states have already spent on vouchers. Instead, let's provide our public schools with the funds they need to implement strategies that we know help our kids — high-quality preschool, well-prepared/well-paid teachers, restorative behavioral counseling and help with accessing social services. Those are just a few examples of solid, evidence-based ideas that are already helping kids right here in Texas.

Let's elect some folks who will set the voucher haggling aside and work to find ways to wisely use our ample state resources to make our Texas public schools the strongest in the country.

Texas revisits school vouchers amid funding concerns: Texas Monthly // via **CBS Texas** on YouTube

Ashley Bean Thornton is the newest member of the Tribune-Herald Board of Contributors. A civic leader and founder of the Act Locally Waco website, she is retired from Baylor University and has worked to help organize after-school programs for Transformation Waco.

