

Ashley Bean Thornton: Don't use low-income students as a reason to vote for voucher supporters

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The Texas Legislature is responsible for funding and regulating public schools in Texas. If you live in McLennan County, you will have the opportunity on Election Day to choose your representative for the Texas House. If you live in District 56 (Doc Anderson's old seat), you will have a choice between Erin Shank and Pat Curry. If you live in District 13, you will have a choice between Albert Hunter and incumbent Angelia Orr.

The biggest difference between these candidates, when it comes to public schools, is whether or not they support Gov. Greg Abbott's school voucher plan (aka "education savings accounts," aka "school choice," aka "parent choice"). Shank and Hunter have both promised they will vote against vouchers. Orr and Curry are both endorsed by Abbott; they will almost certainly support the governor's voucher plan.

In 2023, the voucher plan failed during regular session. Gov. Abbott called four additional special sessions in the hopes of passing the plan — but in the end it was defeated by a coalition of 63 Democrats and 21 Republicans.

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

Sara Diggins, Austin American-Statesman via AP

I watched the floor discussion in the Texas House during that last special session. One after another, voucher supporters took the microphone to give “heartfelt” explanations about how “education savings accounts” were crucial to help low-income kids escape from “failing public schools.” Some even went so far as to say the need for school vouchers is the “civil rights issue of this generation.”

I don’t know if they were sincerely fooling themselves, or deceptively trying to fool the rest of us, but I disagree.

Setting aside for a moment the question of who has been in charge of our public schools for the last two or three decades — and why they are supposedly “failing” (most are not) — I’d like to take a closer look at the claim that school vouchers are meant to help low-income students.

“Low-income” in public school lingo is defined as being eligible for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program. To be eligible, the student’s household income must be around 1.5 times of the federal poverty guideline. In 2024, that guideline is \$31,200 for a family of four. So, for the purpose of this discussion, when I say “low-income” I mean \$31,200 multiplied by 1.5, or a household income of approximately \$46,800 or less for a family of four.

In Waco ISD more than 90% of the students are considered “low-income” according to the free lunch program standard. That’s about 12,600 kids. Many of them are from households that make far less than the maximum of \$46,800 per year.

Vouchers have been sold in other states on the promise of helping low-income students, but we know that has not ended up being the case. In Arizona for example, according to a recent article **in Forbes magazine**, “Only 32% of the voucher applicants come from families making less than \$60,000. And only 3.5% of voucher applicants came from zip codes with schools with D or F grades.”

In Indiana, according to reporting by WFYI-FM, Indianapolis Public Radio, “The 2023-24 academic year was the Indiana program’s 13th year. The typical student receiving a voucher is described as a White, elementary school-age girl from a household of four or five people with an income of nearly \$100,000, according to the Indiana Department of Education.”

We would almost certainly get those same kinds of results in Waco. In the 2023 regular legislative session, the Texas Senate passed a bill, **SB 1**, that would have provided an \$8,000 voucher for students who wanted to leave public school and go to private school. The bill failed to pass the House.

I spent a few minutes Googling “private schools in Waco.” Here is the list I discovered and the annual tuition for elementary students at each one. (For consistency, I only included schools that meet five days a week.)

Ambleside School of Waco — \$9,900

Eagle Christian Academy — \$9,965

Live Oak Classical School — \$11,250

St. Louis Catholic School — \$8,800

St. Paul’s Episcopal Day School — \$10,210

Waco Montessori School — \$9,600

Woodway Christian School — \$7,600 plus a \$415 book fee

As you can see, in Waco at least, \$8,000 is not even enough to pay basic tuition plus required books and uniforms at almost any private school, much less make up for the loss of free/reduced lunch, bus transportation and after-school programs provided by our public schools. It would be difficult for any truly low-income students in Waco to take advantage of the school voucher program as it was proposed and passed by the Texas Senate.

There are many reasons why people might want to put their kids in private schools. Some believe there are academic advantages (I would argue that is not necessarily the advantage people think it is — but that’s for another time), some want more individualized attention, some want a religious setting. That’s fine. We can have a discussion about the pros and cons of private schools and vouchers based on those criteria. But please don’t try to sell vouchers as a way to “help low-income kids who are trapped in failing schools.” That is not how they have worked in other states, and I very much doubt that is how they would work in Waco or the rest of McLennan County.

If the real goal is to help low-income students, subsidizing private schools with vouchers is not the answer. Public schools serve *all* our kids. Instead of spending money on vouchers, let's invest that money in our public schools. There is no reason for any of our public schools to be failing. Texas has the eighth largest economy in the world; we could have the best public schools in the country if we chose to invest in them.

Let's make that choice at the ballot box on Nov. 5. Erin Shank and Albert Hunter are the best candidates for public schools. Let's send them to Austin to represent us.

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.