

We are currently undergoing maintenance on some services, which may temporarily affect access to subscription accounts and the E-edition. We apologize for any inconvenience and appreciate your patience as we work to resolve the issues.

https://wacotrib.com/opinion/column/article_f73d05cc-0061-11f0-bd38-c3e29c266e87.html

Ashley Bean Thornton: School vouchers in Texas – a wasted opportunity to do some real good

ASHLEY BEAN THORNTON Board of Contributors

Mar 14, 2025

Gov. Greg Abbott has spent millions of dollars from mostly out-of-state donors to convince us that we need to spend a billion dollars a year of our tax money so that parents who aren't happy with public schools can collect \$10,000 per year, per kid, to send their kids to private schools.

We could have a long conversation about all the many reasons why vouchers, sold to us as education savings accounts, are a bad idea, but I'll focus on the one thing that makes me maddest, and the one thing that makes me saddest.

Maddest

Intentionally or unintentionally the marketing around school vouchers has given rise to an irksome, off-key, overly dramatic chorus of, "We have been *throwing money* at schools for *years* and they are still *failing*." Ugh! This makes my blood boil.

First of all, in McLennan County at least, our schools are not "failing." Even based on our arguably terrible accountability system, 19 of the 20 school districts in McLennan County are ranked either an "A" or a "B."

People are also reading...

- 1 **Lorena stabbing suspect caught after search with helicopter, drone, police dog**
 - 2 **State diversity audit cites MCC over new-employee video**
 - 3 **Brice Cherry: Hey, Fox, hey ESPN, keep your grubby paws off our Friday nights**
 - 4 **Clifton Lady Cubs hungry for more at state powerlifting meet**
-

When I see a report card full of A's and B's, I don't call it failure. I call it winning. Thank you, educators.

As for "throwing money" at schools? Texas is about the stingiest state in the country when it comes to funding our public schools.

According to the latest apples-to-apples Census comparisons I could find (2022), Texas was No. 41 when it came to per-pupil funding for public education. Even among the 26 states who have a lower cost of living than we have, only four states (South Dakota, Tennessee, Mississippi and Oklahoma) spend less than we do per student.

Saddest

Which brings me to my second point — the one that makes me saddest. Not only are we stingy, but if we don't change course, we are about to invest a whole bunch of money in the wrong thing.

If we have a billion extra dollars to spend on enhancing education for some children and not others, we should be spending it directly on helping low-income kids fill in learning gaps, not handing it out to whoever wants it so they can leave perfectly good schools.



Riesel ISD, at 51.1%, had the highest percentage of economically disadvantaged students that earned an "A" on the state academic accountability rating.

Jerry Larson, Tribune-Herald file photo

Apart from the 19 school districts in McLennan County ranked "A" or "B," there is one that is ranked "C": Waco ISD. Not surprisingly, it is a district with a high concentration of economically disadvantaged students — 90.6%, compared to 51.1% in Riesel, the district in McLennan County with the highest percentage of economically disadvantaged students that earned an "A."

As an illustration of why this matters, let's focus for a bit on McLennan County passing rates for the 2024 eighth grade STAAR reading test.

Students who are not economically disadvantaged by and large did fine. If we look only at eighth graders who are *not* economically disadvantaged, 11 districts (over half) had more than 90% passing. Five more districts were in the very respectable 80s, and three districts had passing rates in the 70s.

If we look instead at only economically disadvantaged students, only three districts had more than 90% passing, seven districts were in the 80s and nine districts had passing rates below 80% — ranging from the 70s down into the 60s.

The four districts with the lowest passing rates for economically disadvantaged kids (61-66%) were the four districts with the highest concentrations of economically disadvantaged kids (73-94%).

Our challenge

In McLennan County, like most places, we don't have a problem educating financially stable kids. Our challenge is educating low-income kids, particularly kids in school districts where there is a high concentration of low-income kids.

If we have a billion extra dollars to spend on education, why in the world aren't we spending it on that?

"Economically disadvantaged," for the purpose of this discussion, means eligible for free and reduced lunch, which means they come from a household with an income 1.5 times the federal poverty guideline. For a family of four, that is \$48,225. In Arizona, where they have a universal ESA program similar to the one Texas is considering, 73% of the ESA participants come from ZIP codes with a median family income of \$75,000 or higher.

A universal school voucher/ESA plan is just not a good way to focus our resources where they are needed most — on programs to help our low-income kids make up some ground.

Is it too late to even be talking about this?

Maybe.

SB 2, the Senate voucher/ESA bill, has already passed the Texas Senate. The House bill, HB 3, is being discussed in committee as of this writing. Seventy-six House representatives, including both of our McLennan County representatives, Angelia Orr

and Pat Curry, have signed on as co-authors, which means they support it. That's enough for the bill to pass the House if none of them change their mind.

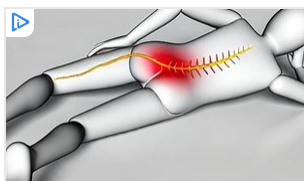
Opportunities for change

But, the Senate Bill and the House Bill are quite different. There will likely be plenty of back and forth — which means plenty opportunities for changes and amendments.

A few suggestions: What about limiting vouchers to only kids within 200% of the poverty guideline, and kids with specific special needs? What about giving vouchers to low-income kids to pay for extra tutoring while they are also enrolled in public schools? What about a voucher to pay expenses for a low-income 3- or 4-year-old to attend pre-K at a neighboring public school or school district if there is not a program available in their home district? Or a voucher to pay transportation costs and other expenses for a low-income student to switch from a public school district with low scores for low-income kids to a different school or a neighboring district with higher scores for low-income kids? What about a voucher for low-income parents to attend parenting classes to help them learn how to teach their kids pre-literacy and pre-math skills?

We may or may not be able to avoid a voucher bill all together at this point — but could we shape it a bit to invest in the kids who really need extra help. It might be worth a call or an email to your state rep to try.

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



Surgeon's Three-Second Sciatica Trick: Do This Before the Pain Gets Worse

CoreVitality

[OPEN](#)

Marketplace Sell Your Items - Free to List

[Visit Full Marketplace](#)



**NEW I Ate
Zombies The**
\$12

ELOISE E. | [sellwild.com](#)



**Vintage Y2K
Daintv Gold Tone**
\$18

ELOISE E. | [sellwild.com](#)



**Athleta Womens
Balance Printed**
\$16

ELOISE E. | [sellwild.com](#)



**Juniors Sz M Zip
Up Windbreaker**
\$18

ELOISE E. | [sellwild.com](#)



**New
York &**
\$16
ELOISE E. | [sellwild.com](#)



**2025 Jeep
Wrangler**
\$42,763
LOTLINX A. | [sellwild.com](#)

