

Beyond the Basics: Education for the 21st Century

I am not seeking political office because of any desire to change careers; in fact, I love my job far too much to switch. I've spent my adult life teaching U.S. history, primarily to community college students. Now I've been at it through several generations of young people and a half-century of lived history. Over those years, I've seen disturbing changes and developing problems that have convinced me my experience might help build a brighter future for the next generation.

At this stage of life, I have nothing left to prove and little left to lose, so it seems only natural that my concerns shift from my own future to those of the young people I have dedicated so much of my life to educating. Over a long career, I have witnessed how lives can be transformed, both through academic advancement and the acquisition of technical skills. Now, especially with the economic stress induced by the COVID crisis, those opportunities are threatened.

I began my academic career as a community college student in the 1960s, when completing a degree program was much easier than it is now. The state of Texas picked up an astounding 90% of the bill for all students in state-supported colleges; National Defense Student grants and loans were available to cover the other 10%, plus books. With a minimum wage job, a student could work summers or part-time and cover living expenses. A paycheck for two-weeks' work at minimum wage covered the entire bill for a semester of tuition and fees at state colleges. When I married at age 19, my husband was changing tires at a service station for a living and I had no resources. Nevertheless, by taking advantage of all these opportunities, we completed our bachelor's degrees in three years with minimal debt and continued to pursue graduate degrees. Education transformed our own lives.

To say times have changed is an understatement. Even pre-COVID, I watched my students struggle as college costs escalated beyond the reach of middle-class families, and working-class families saw the American dream disappear. Parents who think they have saved for their children's education are shocked to find their resources overwhelmed. Most of my students are working, often at jobs that pay so little they can't survive on part-time wages. They have to work full time, giving them little time to devote to their studies. No wonder many of them drop out. Meanwhile, my colleagues who are just beginning careers in college teaching are so burdened by the debt required to complete graduate studies that they can't fully participate in the economy. By contrast, my husband and I were able to buy our first home the first year he taught; today my colleagues struggle just to make rent.

Now the COVID-induced economy threatens to worsen an already discouraging situation, as state budget cuts are considered. Even before the crisis hit, funding for Texas colleges had been sliced by 23%, over \$2,000 per student, as a result of the 2008 financial crisis. When state funding goes down, inevitably students' costs go up, resulting in a debt-burdened start in life. The average Texas graduate was already entering the workforce \$30,000 in debt, even before this crisis. Now they may be looking at bleak job opportunities on top of a mountain of debt.

This is not just an issue for students and their families. Quality of life for the entire community is enhanced when education levels rise—our founding fathers noted that in the earliest days of the Republic. Education has always been seen as a public good, not just a private benefit. We have built on that legacy for over two hundred years, gaining a reputation as the world's premier system of higher education. We are now in danger of losing that status.

Part of my job in teaching American history is to keep alive the promise of our "nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" in Lincoln's words. Americans have never believed that "equality" means equal *outcomes*, but we have committed to the promise of equal *opportunity*.

Part of my job as District 68's representative in the Texas legislature, will be to preserve and expand those opportunities to all Texans. I see this commitment as an investment in our future, the best investment we can make!