

Our Public Schools: Our Future

My support for public schools comes from my family background. My mother was a teacher and my dad served on the local school board; my sister was a teacher; my husband was a teacher; I am a teacher; and now my son is a teacher.

My mother began teaching in the one-room schools of rural East Texas in the 1920s. Over the course of a forty-year career, she taught almost every subject in every grade, whether or not she had the official credentials. In a burst of international awareness during World War II, her school board decided the children needed to study a foreign language. But they had a problem: no one in the community even spoke one, much less had the credentials to teach it. Mother got a few Spanish books, began studying over the summer, and developed enough skill to impart at least some basics in an unknown tongue.

Whatever her subject, her classroom brought learning to life, sometimes quite literally since she always kept a variety of aquariums, terrariums, and assorted small animals for students' enrichment and enjoyment. One wall was always covered with butcher paper so the students could illustrate whatever they were studying. Students who did not excel academically could find success through some other avenue and always know that she valued their talents.

Her teaching philosophy was simple: "They might not remember what I teach them, but they will never forget how I teach them." The most important thing she taught them, and me, was the sheer joy of learning something new. She believed if a student failed to grasp an essential skill one year, they could make it up the next, as long as they had that zest for learning. Near the end of her long life, she received a touching thank-you letter from a student she had taught over fifty years earlier and had not heard from since. The letter credited my mom with being one of the most influential people in the author's life. In that note, I saw just how profound a committed teacher's impact can be, albeit in ways rarely acknowledged and surely immeasurable.

Just to be clear, I am not advocating a return to one-room schoolhouses or to uncredentialed teachers in our classrooms. Nor do I oppose ensuring accountability in public schools. I understand that our schools must be far more sophisticated and that our students must learn at a more advanced level than in my mom's day. In most ways, our schools are far better now than in the so-called "good-old-days." But I do think we can take some

lessons from these pioneers of public education and the communities that supported them.

First, we can restore the high regard for teachers that existed in her day. Mom never made much money teaching school, but she was looked up to and admired as a competent expert in her profession. By contrast, today we have people who haven't darkened a schoolhouse door since their own graduation making laws, writing regulations, and imposing bureaucratic insanity on teachers who know better. But instead of respecting and listening to them, policymakers ignore them, or worse, insult them. As a legislator, I would support teacher involvement in decisions that impact their careers and their students' lives. Meanwhile, I invite them to join and help shape my campaign.

Second, we can restore the public schools to their status as centers of community life and reject such gimmicks as charter schools and voucher programs that threaten this status. While the move to privatize public education may have begun with good intentions, it has failed our children and our communities. Instead of serving the public good, it has turned into a money-making scheme for wealthy investors, who start private schools and demand public funds to pay for them. Of course, they don't ask for or accept the advice of the real experts who work with the kids every day, and the schools are often plagued by mismanagement and even fraud. They have outsized influence with the state legislature, not because of expertise, but because of their campaign contributions. I won't be taking their money. In fact, I will oppose any state plan that would use vouchers, tax credits, taxpayer savings grants, tuition reimbursements, or any other means to divert public tax dollars to private entities. Such systems have no academic or financial accountability or transparency to the state, taxpayers, or local communities.

Third, we can rebalance state and local control of our schools. When my dad served on the local schoolboard it was deemed an honor and a sacred duty because the public school was essential to the life of the community. As with all functioning democratic institutions, the people chosen are directly accountable to the citizens and taxpayers who elect them. Unfortunately, instead of recognizing and valuing this relationship, recent policies have eroded local control and shifted power to disconnected bureaucrats in Austin. When the community is no longer empowered to manage their schools, citizens understandably feel less vested in them. As a legislator, I would support policies that respect the integrity of local communities.

Fourth, we can recapture some of the creative spirit that fosters love of learning, like in my mom's classroom. We should start by reducing the

reliance on standardized tests and eliminating the demoralizing A-F grading system for schools. I understand the need to have reasonable assessments of our progress, and as a teacher I recognize the importance of testing to facilitate learning. But rather than being teaching aids, the tests have become ends in themselves, destroying the pleasure in teaching and the joy in learning. Much of what a good teacher accomplishes in the classroom simply cannot be measured. I would replace high-stakes testing with a comprehensive accountability system that provides assessment with real value for students, parents, teachers, and communities.

Fifth, we can limit class size so that teachers have the time to focus on each student. Surely one of the secrets of my mom's success was the size of her classes—they were small because the population of the community was small. Today's schools must accommodate a large and diverse population, but now, as then, teaching is as much about relationships as it is about imparting knowledge and skills. When teachers know their students well, they don't need standardized tests to tell them who needs extra help.

Sixth, we can create a system that attracts and maintains the best teachers. That's probably more difficult than in my mom's day because, for one thing, women like her had few career options besides teaching. Fortunately, times have changed and all careers are open to women and men alike, but that means schools must compete for the best talent. While I will listen to teachers themselves to formulate policies that will accomplish this, I have some rather obvious ideas for starters:

1. Pay salaries that recognize teachers' true value. We cannot claim to care about our children and not pay their teachers well. No teacher should have to take a second or third job to support their families.
2. Provide health care benefits. Most people today get their health insurance through their employers, but public school teachers are at the mercy of the market. The costs are so high that many cannot afford to stay in a profession they love.
3. Improve working conditions by creating schedules that give them time for planning and grading during the day. The work is too hard to have to take it home every night and weekend.
4. Provide the supplies and tools they need for success, especially access to the internet and to other advantages available through modern technology. While technology can never replace teaching, it can be a powerful supplement.

Probably most important, the state can provide adequate funding to make Texas schools the best in the nation. Recently the state budget has been benefiting from the rise in local property values. Citizens assumed the

increased funds would go to their schools, but instead the legislature's emphasis has been on reducing property taxes and our schools have been neglected. The finance system should benefit local school districts, not divert money to the state to reduce its share of funding our schools. Meanwhile politicians promise the voters both lower taxes and better schools, pushing the "Santa Claus" theory of government: i.e. the state can deliver excellent public services but no one has to pay.

In my opinion, the state legislature's most important job is to provide the resources to educate our children. I plan to take that job seriously.