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REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Closing doors to the future

When my friends and I were growing up, public education was held sacred by our parents. As the children of immigrants, education had been their way into American society and their way up the economic ladder.

The Russians launched Sputnik on Oct. 4, 1957, two days before my sixth birthday. The Cold War with the totalitarian Soviet Union gave our parents, who had sacrificed greatly during World War II, an even stronger reason to vote for school bonds and support with their tax dollars government initiatives like the National Defense Education Act and the National Defense Student Loan Program in 1958.

Seven years later, when President Lyndon Johnson signed the Higher Education Act of 1965 at his alma mater, Southwest Texas State College, he proclaimed that it would “swing open a new door for the young people of America — the door to education.” He called public education “a way to deeper personal fulfillment, greater personal productivity, and increased personal reward.”

It had been so for him. He wanted it to be so for others.

The Higher Education Act supported libraries, equipped college laboratories and gave teachers a chance to become better teachers. Because of it, in 1966 alone, 140,000 young men and women who never would have gone past high school went to college.

To LBJ, the Higher Education Act and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 were “keystones of the 89th Congress.” They epitomized the thoughts of Thomas Jefferson that “the care of human life and happiness is the first and only legitimate objective of good government.”

In my adult lifetime, eight presidents have stressed that public education at all levels is vital for the security and prosperity of our nation. Major studies under President Ronald Reagan (1983) and President George W. Bush (2006) gave us sobering news. We need to improve K-12 education in math, sciences and basic skills like literacy and language. In September 2009, President Barack Obama spoke directly to the nation’s schoolchildren to stress the value of education.

Yet we are slashing away at public education budgets and closing doors to the future.

The University of Texas has an annual impact on our state economy of \$7.4 billion. Every state dollar spent on UT generates \$18 dollars for the state. Cutting funding to UT is cutting one of the state’s clear economic lifelines. Slashing public K-12 budgets in school districts across the state is severing the lifelines of teachers and students.

A former honors student of mine has been an elementary teacher since 2003, beginning in Austin. She writes, “I am now in my third year as a bilingual teacher in Arlington ISD and pregnant with my first child. All first, second, and third-year teachers in Arlington ISD are considered ‘probationary’ and will be laid off in all likelihood before the school year ends. No matter that I teach 100 percent Hispanic kids, 100 percent of whose parents are monolingual Spanish speakers, in an impoverished Title 1 school district and yet somehow manage to have TAKS test scores comparable to those of the richest, whitest schools in the district. Qualifications don’t seem to matter in this state. Over 750 teachers in Arlington ISD are looking at being laid off.”

Here in the Austin school district, more than 1,000 jobs might be cut. Plans have been announced to eliminate the well-enrolled and highly successful Latin programs at three of the six high schools that offer Latin: Bowie, Austin and LBJ. The program at Austin High, the oldest public high school west of the Mississippi, is well over 100 years old.

Latin at these schools attracts top-performing students, as it does nationally. At LBJ, Latin is taught in the Liberal Arts and Science Academy (LASA), a magnet program of statewide and national distinction. One hundred percent of its Latin students scored 3 or above on the national Advanced Placement tests. According to national Educational Testing Service statistics for the last eight years, students who take Latin in high school outperform all students on the verbal portion of the Scholastic Aptitude Test by wide margins. Latin taken in grade school boosts student performance in math, science and reading.

The motto of the Headlines Club in Austin is “non quis, sed quid.” Its highly successful members, some of whom learned Latin in public high schools, adhere to the principle “not who, but what.”

That same motto applies to American public education: It is what you can achieve that matters, not who you are or where you come from.

Look at what your school district is doing. Stop closing doors that were so hard to open. Why is raising and paying taxes for the common good no longer virtuous?

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