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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 lines. Slashing public K-12 budgets in school districts across the state is severing the lines of teachers and students.