

Commentary: Reform Texas education by putting parents in control

Bishop Michael F. Olson and Leo Linbeck III, For the Express-News
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For more than 20 years, education reform has largely been stagnant. But during the past 24 months, parent dissatisfaction with pandemic policies, sensational stories of student indoctrination and the [Espinoza v. Montana ruling](#) by the U.S. Supreme Court that allowed broader use of public funds for private education, have all served as catalysts for at least a dozen state legislatures to pass new or expanded school choice legislation: Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Oklahoma, New Hampshire, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah and West Virginia.

All eyes now turn to Texas. With a strong and growing base of families and parent groups pushing for more control over their children's education and the governor and lieutenant governor providing the essential political leadership, change is coming. The [recent vote](#) by the State Board of Education to drop its long-time opposition to school choice is clear evidence that elected officials see the time has come for bold action.

It is important that we take steps with a clear set of priorities and not react with passions of fear and anger that would simply exacerbate the problems affecting our education system.

For Texas Catholics — bishops, clergy, lay leadership and the broader faithful — it is time for us to respond to the needs of the larger community and make a meaningful and effective contribution to providing solutions. The Catholic Church in Texas educates nearly 63,000 students in its schools and more than 350,000 public school students in its religious catechism classes. There are also many Catholics serving as teachers and administrators in Texas' public school system.

As Pope Francis has written, “Parents themselves enjoy the right to choose freely the kind of education — accessible and of good quality — which they wish to give their children in accordance with their convictions. Schools do not replace parents but complement them.”

However, for many Texans, that right has been effectively denied because funding has been allocated to public schools as agencies of the state, instead of recognizing that the primary educators of children are their parents. As a result, dozens of Texas Catholic schools serving poor families have closed for purely financial reasons, and the poor have been denied access to making the choice to which they have a right as parents.

Education reform must focus on funding students and not schools.

To remedy these injustices, we support legislation that establishes a universal Education Savings Account, or ESA, a form of voucher program, and that respects the religious liberty of Catholic and other denominational schools. We believe such legislation must help families whose financial hardship has effectively denied them the right to choose the quality of education they desire for their children. Every Texas parent should have the ability to make such a choice, and the state should respect the religious freedom of those families when they make that choice.

It’s time to put Texas back in the lead by passing a universal, fully funded ESA program.

It’s time to put Texas fathers and mothers back in control of their children’s education.

It’s time to put Texas families first.

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