



State should implement real reform, true choice

By ASHLEY LANDESS

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The debate on education reform no longer centers on whether we need to change our education system. Finally, we all agree on that. At issue is how we do it.

State Superintendent Jim Rex is talking about the right things: greater accountability, more choices and higher standards. The question is whether the proposals will achieve real results or simply the appearance of improvement.

One of the biggest obstacles to solving the education crisis is the lack of transparency in school spending. Parents are asked to buy supplies for the schools, participate in fundraisers and pay higher taxes for the sake of quality education. What they don't know is that instead of buying pencils, they are paying for high-priced lobbyists and weeklong conferences at the beach. That information is simply not available, and there are ways to fix that.

If Jim Rex is serious about transparency, he will demand that school districts make every dime of spending available to the public, not in a complicated system that is impossible to understand but in a way that any parent and taxpayer can access.

In fairness to school districts, their hands are often tied as to how they can spend the money that is supposed to educate children. Frankly, they know better than folks in the General Assembly what programs they need in their schools, but an archaic funding system essentially sends money to pay for programs that are designed in Columbia and might not work for all children. A new funding system will ensure that dollars fund the children and not outdated programs that are rarely analyzed and often duplicative.

Schools need flexibility to spend their dollars in ways that raise achievement. That means dollars follow the child, not the programs. And that also means not protecting sacred cow programs that are pushed every year in the Statehouse by special interests.

With greater flexibility comes more accountability, and that must mean rigorous standards that cannot be watered down to give the appearance of progress. Failing schools are failing children. Half of our children do not graduate in four years, and of those who remain and take the SAT, they score at the bottom.

The National Governors Association has called for strict and honest methods of reporting the dropout rate. That is a huge step in solving the problem. In the past, numbers were padded and fiddled with to make the schools look better. That disingenuous reporting method created a false sense of success even as our dropouts fell through the cracks, ended up in prison and cost the state millions of dollars.

The testing system certainly needs an overhaul but one that makes it more rigorous and truly diagnostic for every child and that tests all critical subjects that students must be proficient in to succeed.

Safer schools also require vigilant reporting of dangerous activity and a safety net for parents whose children feel threatened. And ultimately, that means substantive school choice. Public school transferability as proposed by Jim Rex will not give parents in failing schools choice at all but only the appearance of it.

In reality, there is no room in the higher-achieving schools to accommodate the thousands of children trapped in underperforming schools. In fact, only 3 percent of those children could actually transfer to those better schools, and this year's "open enrollment" plan virtually ensures that no higher-achieving school would have to take even the 3 percent who could be accommodated. That is not choice. That is not reform. In fact, that is nothing more than false hope and political posturing.

Furthermore, this plan actually offers nothing more than what federal law already requires. Unless parents are allowed to spend some of their education tax dollars in schools they choose, their children will be forced to stay in unsafe schools where they are not learning and will likely leave before they graduate.

Frankly, Jim Rex and many legislators want the issue of real school choice to go away. They hope the public will be fooled by a superficial plan that does nothing new and nothing substantive. Most politicians just don't want to rock the boat, and the education establishment is a well-funded machine that is often more focused on fighting change than achieving reform.

Lobbyists for powerful administrators and school boards accuse choice advocates of "destroying public education." They cannot provide one example of a single education system "destroyed" by real choice anywhere in the world, and such plans do exist all over this country and in others.

But then, the same people who fight real choice also fought charter schools, higher standards and accountability, claiming they also would cripple public schools. That did not happen, and it will not happen under real reform measures that include real choice.

It is critical to pay good teachers what they are worth and provide more incentives for them to succeed. No one disagrees with that. They work hard, they struggle against a system that often does not support them, and they deserve to be rewarded. Frankly, for Jim Rex to be discussing reform at all - including public school choice - represents progress over the years. At least he is not arguing that we do not need change at all when our dropout rate has gotten worse - and that is true despite a per-pupil spending amount that is among the highest in the South and increasing at one of the highest percentages in the nation.

Real reform is not going to be easy. You will know it is real and substantive when every taxpayer-funded education lobbyist fights it and the education establishment rolls out a full-fledged war against it, because real reform will shake up the system.

And with that shake-up will come what all children deserve - a successful delivery system that provides real options, standards that don't just look good on paper but demand success in the classroom and a guarantee that every child has a real choice and a real chance.

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