

School vouchers a civil rights issue? ‘No,’ says Pastors for Texas Children

September 23, 2016

AUSTIN—Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick has framed the school voucher debate in terms of enabling parents choose their child’s school, calling it a crucial civil rights issue. And a Baptist minister who leads a pro-public education advocacy group calls that “blasphemous.”

Equating efforts to secure public funds for parochial education with the civil rights struggle represents “a desperate and cynical attempt to make vouchers more palatable,” said Charles Foster Johnson, executive director of Pastors for Texas Children.

“It dishonors the memory and witness of those who sacrificed so much in the quest toward human equality and justice,” Johnson said.

“It seeks to do something bad in the name of something good. The only ‘right’ Lt. Gov. Patrick’s misguided policies will secure is that of wealthy private interests to make our schools for-profit enterprises—that is, to make commodities of our children and markets of our classrooms.”

Making school choice a legislative priority

Patrick repeatedly has named “school choice” as one of his top policy priorities for the 2017 Texas Legislature.

Speaking to the Texas Public Policy Foundation’s policy orientation in January, he [proposed an approach](#) modeled after programs the Nevada Legislature approved last year. The Nevada plan gives state money to

student savings accounts parents can use to pay for private religious school tuition.

Although the plan has been challenged in court, in May a [Nevada judge ruled](#) in favor of the voucher system, dismissing claims it violates a provision in the state constitution barring the use of state funds for sectarian purposes.

On Sept. 20, Patrick spoke at a school choice summit in Houston, sponsored by the Texas Conservative Coalition Research Institute, stressing school choice as imperative for Texas parents.

“The argument is over, ‘Do we have school choice, equally and fairly, to every parent?’ That’s the choice. That’s the debate. And I say it’s the civil right of every parent to have that choice,” Patrick said, according to [Kronberg’s Quorum Report](#).

Not really helping poor children

Johnson particularly took issue with Patrick’s frequent references to helping poor children trapped in “failed schools.”

“Lt. Gov. Patrick’s voucher schemes will never help poor children in impoverished neighborhoods,” Johnson said. “If helping poor children were the real objective, their schools would be fully funded—something Lt. Gov. Patrick steadfastly refuses to do.

“Texans consistently repudiate vouchers for many good reasons, not the least important of which is that government money to underwrite religious private schools is a violation of religious liberty—the principle upon which our nation was founded.”