

Voices: Stand with Texas pastors to support the state's public schools

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Good schools are essential to a just society. Along with safe roads, clean water, public safety and adequate health care, they constitute God's common good.



Charles Foster Johnson

Education is one of the Texas Legislature's most important duties—a duty to almost 5.5 million Texas schoolchildren.

While it is hard for decent, conservative Texans to believe, a coordinated, well-funded assault on our community and neighborhood schools, schoolteachers and schoolchildren was launched in the 85th session of the Texas Legislature earlier this year.

Let's be clear about who suffers this attack—our fellow church members, spouses, neighbors and family members. Our brothers and sisters in Christ.

The assault occurred on multiple fronts:

Inadequate funding



A brief two decades ago, public education comprised more than 70 percent of the Texas state budget. Now, it has dropped to 38 percent and is going down steadily. Texas ranks in the bottom third in the nation in per-pupil funding. After \$5.4 billion was cut in the budget crisis of 2011, only \$3.4 billion was restored in 2013 when we were flush again.

Most educators agree the state is several billion dollars behind in “making suitable provision” for public education, as the Texas Constitution requires. Rising property taxes, which we are led to believe go to our schools, are being used to pay for other budget items.

What did the Texas Senate, under the leadership of Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, do about making up the gap in their proposed budget? Nothing. Nada. Zero. Zilch.

The Senate’s original 2017 budget line item for public education was \$0. After the Texas House budget, under the leadership of Speaker Joe Straus, proposed a structural funding reform of \$1.8 billion for public education, Lt. Gov. Patrick’s Senate finally came back with \$500 million—but only if the House accepted its private-school voucher bill. The meager concession constituted a bribe from the Senate, and the House refused to take it.

So, this is what it has come to? A Senate that cynically tosses a tip to almost 90 percent of Texas children who attend public schools, but only if we agree to underwrite the private education of a few affluent children through vouchers.

Private school vouchers

Cloaked in the deceptive language of “school choice,” “education savings grants” and “tuition tax credits,” vouchers divert already-strapped public education funds to support private schools. They are:

- **Unconstitutional.** First, they take money away from our “system of public free schools,” as the Texas Constitution explicitly calls for in Article 7, Section 1. Second, they subsidize religious schools, thus “respecting the establishment of religion,” as the First Amendment of the United States Constitution clearly prohibits.
- **Unsuccessful.** There is no data to show voucher schools produce an educational outcome for our children superior to traditional public schools. In fact, in Florida, Michigan and Washington, D.C., the results show voucher programs underperformed the public schools.
- **Unrighteous.** There is something morally unacceptable about taking money out of the public trust of education for all our children, including our poorest kids, and sending that money to augment the education of children affluent enough to attend private schools. As [Marv Knox said recently in his editorial](#), it is “Robin Hood in reverse,” taking from the poor and giving to the rich.

Vouchers never are enough to cover the cost of a high-quality private school, much less pay for transportation, uniforms, meals and numerous other out-of-pocket expenses incurred at the private school. No, they are only enough to subsidize the costs of families already able to pay for the lion’s share of that private school tuition.

Patrick said vouchers were his No. 1 priority this legislative session. So, the Senate sent to the House of Representatives several voucher proposals. They all failed the House by sizeable margins.

One might wonder why so many of our senators support voucher policies so harmful to our children and the dedicated professionals who teach them. There are 31 senators in Texas government, while there are 150 representatives. House members are more closely connected to our communities. They see firsthand the great job our teachers are doing—and doing on a financial shoestring. On the other hand, senators are further removed from our neighborhoods, more disconnected from our schoolteachers who work long hours at low pay to instruct and mentor our kids. Senators are more susceptible to the legislative manipulation and moneyed outside interests that do not have our children's best interests at heart.

Payroll deduction ban

If these two legislative assaults weren't enough, there is one more—the proposed payroll deduction ban. For decades, teachers have been allowed to have their professional association dues automatically deducted from their paychecks. This is a small convenience offered those who serve our public good—police and firefighters as well as teachers. It comes at no expense to taxpayers. They are not “union dues.” No, it is a simple option accorded those who advance God's common good on behalf of all of us. It is a small way of saying, “Thank you.”

But now, the Texas Senate wishes to eliminate this privilege. Senators passed a bill disallowing automatic, recurring deduction of association dues. But get this: They targeted only teachers—not police and firefighters. It is a jab directed explicitly at our teachers. Instead of finding ways to praise teachers and affirm them for their public service, the Senate devised a petty way to punish and demean them instead. Thankfully, it did not get the time of day in the House.

Now we are watching a special legislative session called by Gov. Greg Abbott. While he has ordered the legislature to fix school funding, he

inexplicably also has charged them to revisit the misguided policy of vouchers and the ridiculous payroll deduction ban. It is not a comfortable position for us as pastors and faith leaders, but we are compelled to confront our governor and lieutenant governor about these bad and dangerous ideas. We have a responsibility before our Lord to “do justice” and “love our neighbor,” as God’s word clearly commands.

The 2,000 faith leaders in Pastors for Texas Children are deeply grateful for the historic pro-public education stand of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and its Christian Life Commission, from which we were birthed four years ago. Solid, Bible-believing, conservative Texas Baptists love and support their schools. They know our schools are no more perfect than our churches, but also know millions of children are loved and cared for in our schools every day.

We are in a crisis of God’s common good in Texas. God’s people need to stand up, speak out and support quality, fully funded public education for all God’s children.

If you are a faith leader in your congregation—pastor, staff minister or volunteer of any kind—join us by becoming part of our witness. Simply take a moment to sign up on our website by [clicking here](#). There is no fee or any dues. You are not required to be a preacher or a pastor or an ordained minister—only a follower of Christ who sees the goodness of God in Texas teachers and wants to do everything you can to support them.

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