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‘School choice’: An education argument from 30 years ago returns to Texas

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Political pitches for school vouchers, or “education savings accounts,” cite “school choice” and “education freedom.” The same arguments helped sell public charter schools in the 1990s.

As school vouchers gain momentum in the Texas Legislature, Gov. Greg Abbott has been pitching a plan at stops in private, Christian schools all over Texas.

One recent stop took him to Conroe and the Covenant Christian school.

“Parents deserve education freedom,” Abbott said to the packed crowd of supporters. “And the way to do it is with school choice through state funded education savings accounts.”

Abbott’s preferred bill, Senate Bill 8, would use taxpayer money for private and home schooling through those voucher-like ESAs.

But to former Dallas Superintendent Michael Hinojosa, terms like “school choice” and “education freedom” have a nostalgic ring to them.

Those words echoed across the state in the 1990s during efforts to legalize charter schools. The now-Superintendent-in-residence for the Council of Great City Schools, Hinojosa remembers.

“Yes,” said Hinojosa, “I recall that dialog and that pitch.”

In 1995, Texas lawmakers approved charter schools. They were designed, in part, to provide competition to traditional public schools, many of which performed poorly.

Applying an economic free market philosophy to schools, the argument went that bad campuses would have to innovate and deliver in order to survive. If they didn’t, students could enroll in new, upstart charter schools, and state education money would follow

them.

Over time, that's what happened, Hinojosa said

"In a way, it really did make us step up our game," he said.

Over two lengthy tenures in Dallas, he oversaw a slew of new course options for kids that hadn't existed before.

The list is long, and includes boys-only and girls-only schools, along with high schools offering college courses for college credits.

In time, Fort Worth ISD, smaller north Texas districts and others around the state added similar options.

Meanwhile, many superintendents tried to beat the charters, fought them, and lost kids to them.

In Spring Branch ISD, though, the small Houston-area district decided to join with charters. They partnered with KIPP and Yes Prep, according to Duncan Klussmann, Spring Branch superintendent from 2004 to 2015.

At the time, he needed a way to fill empty rooms in some of his schools.

"Those [Spring Branch ISD] schools were no longer under-utilized," he said. "Where we had bands that could barely make a band to take to contest, we now had two or three bands at those campuses."

Klussmann, now on the education faculty at the University of Houston, says charter schools successfully prompted traditional districts like his to create more course offerings for eager students and families. As a result, he says there's no need for vouchers.

What's more, in Spring Branch ISD, Klussmann says parents who left his district for private schools wanted out because their kids were stressed by state testing. This almost never gets mentioned today.

“They weren’t leaving because they didn’t like their elementary school or didn’t like their teacher,” Klussmann said. “They were leaving because they didn’t want to take the STAAR test [State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness].”

Initial research into charter performance showed mixed reviews compared to traditional public schools.

Researcher Peter Wolf, who studies voucher and charter schools while on the faculty of the University of Arkansas, said charters delivered for the students.

“Almost every study reports either no effects or positive effects on the achievement of students who remain in public schools that are impacted by competition from either charters or private school voucher programs,” Wolf said.

Joshua Cowen, an education professor at the University of Michigan, disagreed.

He’s studied charter and private schools too — especially in Louisiana. Charter and voucher schools took over in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

Cowen calls it one of the largest failures ever in education policy

“Louisiana vouchers program had roughly twice the negative harm on test scores that the COVID-19 pandemic did more recently to test scores,” said Cowen. “Or that Hurricane Katrina did to kids in New Orleans schools back in 2005.”

Cowen said vouchers are all about defunding public education, even though public schools educate the overwhelming majority of Texans.

Former superintendent Hinojosa doesn’t even use the word “voucher.”

“I call it an entitlement program,” Hinojosa said. “This is a national playbook that every red state is doing.”

He added that many who’d opt for the vouchers may already be in private or home school.

“These weren’t families that were in the inner cities that didn’t have other options,” he said.

Abbott's preferred bill, SB 8, has already passed the Texas Senate. Meanwhile, Texas House members voted 86-52 to block public funding for vouchers, though they haven't yet voted on SB 8.

As originally written, SB 8 would prohibit families with children now enrolled in private schools from using vouchers or ESAs. But Hinojosa and Cowen expected the bill would change before a final version. And in the bill approved by Texas Senators, it had already changed.

Former Spring Branch superintendent Klussmann said he wouldn't mind vouchers if private schools that took public money played by the same rules as other Texas public schools.

"It seems so counterproductive to say we're going to hold you, a public school and a charter school, to this very high standard of performance," Klussman said, "but we're going to automatically give \$8,000 to someone else with no accountability."

Voucher plans have been tried before in Texas. They've typically fallen short in rural districts, where public schools are the heart of the community, often emotionally and economically.

Bill Tarleton, executive director the Texas Rural Education Association, echoes Klussman's view that state education dollars should only go to schools following the same rules.

"One of those rules for example being special education students," said Tarleton. "If they were to be a part of the voucher system, private schools don't have to provide safe, free and appropriate public education. And I'm very concerned about that."