

'Quest for excellence'

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Our most valuable resources are our children. However, today, we are crippling them because we are not providing them with a good education.

Recent figures show that there are more than 3.5 million functionally illiterate adults in Texas and nearly three million Texas adults cannot make change for a \$20 bill. Student achievement scores have declined nationally for the past twenty years, with average SAT scores declining 50 and 40 points for verbal and math skills.

Our teachers often fare no better when tested than the students. In Houston, 62 percent of the teachers failed a college sophomore-level reading test. If our teachers cannot read and write, is it any wonder that our students cannot perform these tasks?

In our math and science classrooms, more than 85,000 students lack qualified teachers. In an ever-increasing technological age, we cannot afford to have an inferior public school system if we are to maintain a competitive edge in business and in industry.

Texans for Conservative Government, the legislative and advocacy arm of the Texas Foundation for Conservative Studies, has published a plan that we feel will restore the "quest for excellence" in our public schools.

In our plan, we outline nine points that need to be implemented. Our solutions are:

- (1) Merit pay for excellent teachers;
- (2) A "master teacher" rank on the teaching career ladder;
- (3) The establishment of an "Education Quality Fund" of \$600 million, with 65 percent allocated for salary increases for teachers and 35 percent for maintenance and operation. Each district would be required to allocate a minimum of 10 percent of their salary funds to merit pay and a minimum of 5 percent to a master teacher career ladder. This would also translate into an increase in general teachers' salaries of approximately 16 percent as well;
- (4) Change of education curricula at state colleges offering teacher certification;
- (5) Financial assistance for promising teachers still in college, with a post-graduation service requirement;
- (6) Adequate testing of potential public school graduates to insure that basic skills have been learned;

(7) Upgrading of curricula at public schools with a greater emphasis on discipline in the classroom. We do not think it is unreasonable for every high school graduate in the State of Texas to be required to take four years of English and mathematics, three years of science, two years of a foreign language, and four years of history or social studies;

(8) Tightening of standards for teacher certification, with more emphasis on basics in the teacher's field-of-study;

(9) Allowing the private sector to assist in providing needed expertise, support mechanism, and especially, skilled personnel.

The proposals that have received the most media and public attention are the merit pay and master teacher proposals. Both are essential if we are to have good teachers teaching our children in the future. We must keep our best teachers in the classrooms.

Merit pay rewards excellence in the teaching profession through pay bonuses for improvements in students' performances. The merit pay bonuses would be annual and repeated only if re-earned. Peer review can easily be implemented to make sure merit pay is administered fairly.

A teacher career ladder is a system that has certain professional levels that a teacher can reach through skill, advanced education and achievements through the years of teaching. The highest rank would be that of a "master teacher," and with it would come a permanent higher salary level and professional distinction. The master teacher rank is similar to a full professorship at the college level.

Mark White and the teachers' union want to raise our taxes to give teachers a 24 percent across-the-board pay hike without regard to any real reform.

They are wrong. How many times do we hear political groups simply advocate throwing more tax dollars into mediocre and declining programs instead of enacting positive reform measures?

All Texans must focus on the important issue of public education because the future of our children, and with them the future prosperity of our state, is at stake.

We believe that our "quest for excellence" plan is the first step in the long road to rebuilding confidence in Texas' public school systems, and to make our public schools the best public schools in America.