

Public Education

By Bill Hobby

For more than twenty years parents of students in property-poor school districts have challenged the way Texas pays for its public schools.

Now come the wealthier school districts challenging the system because it takes tax money away from them and redistributes it to the poorer districts.

What are these lawsuits all about, anyway? They are about the quality of public education. But, as it turns out, courts are no better equipped than legislatures to deal with so abstract an idea. Therefore, courts and legislatures have chosen to talk about dollars instead of quality.

Quality and dollars may be first cousins, but they aren't identical twins.

In 1989, then United States Secretary of Education Lauro Cavazos told the Texas Legislature that more money is not the answer to problems in education. That's not what he thought several years before when, as president of Texas Tech University, he came to the legislature asking for more money. It is amazing how one's perception of the problem is affected by one's perspective.

School finance is a dinosaur issue. It is like a dinosaur because it is large, and because it is anachronistic.

School finance is large because it deals with the most basic of governmental, or community, services. Many states, including my own, devote more than half their budgets to education. More than half of our local property taxes go for education. Education is by far the largest industry in the country. In other words, all that is at stake is billions of dollars. How shall they be spent? Who shall spend them?

School finance is anachronistic because it is just about the last governmental service that is paid for in such a way as to provoke economic class warfare. The key words in many of the lawsuits are "equity" or "equalization." That is because high-wealth school districts can raise money more easily, through property taxes, than can low-wealth districts. In other words, educational effort still depends on local real estate values. Hence the economic class warfare.

Central city and property-poor rural districts are pitted against wealthy suburban districts. The resultant political fights:

- Anglo vs. minority
- rich vs. poor
- Democrat vs. Republican

are not easy to resolve or pretty to watch.

Then add to the economic issues deeply held and conflicting beliefs about education itself. What about bilingual programs? Should they be transitional, English-as-second-language programs? Or should they teach basic subjects in other languages? If they do the latter, does bilingual education become segregation by another name? Are these students beneficiaries of enlightened education, or victims of a system that condemns them to yet another generation of second-class citizenship?

In deciding how to spend limited dollars, should preference be given to the mainstream student? Or should special allotments be made to students with special problems: physical and mental handicaps, deprived backgrounds, inability to speak English? If special allotments are made, do they encourage

schools to put students in these programs for financial, rather than educational, reasons?

What about "local control"? No term in the vocabulary of education is more fraught with emotion than "local control."

Where "local control" produces excellence it should be strengthened, encouraged, duplicated, cloned, transplanted. But where "local control" is a euphemism for academic laxity and poor administration, it should be eliminated. My fear is that "local control," in the academic debates of the 1990's, can become a euphemism for irresponsibility in the way that "states rights" was in the civil rights debates of the 1950's.

What about governance? What should be the role of school boards? Administrators? Teachers? Parents? Who's in charge here? Who's responsible? Who's accountable? To whom? For what? For that matter, why should children have to go to school anyway? Why shouldn't those parents who want to, teach them at home? That way those students certainly wouldn't be exposed to godless, atheistic ideas like evolution.

How easy these issues are to demagogue!

To be sure, our demagogues have more recently been occupied with abortion and flag-burning, but they can always fall back on local control and Darwinism.

State governments are, after all, fairly mundane, pedestrian institutions. Governors and legislators don't get to decide major issues like the fates of Saddam Hussein or the Kurds. They don't get to decide if we should aid Gorbachev or trade with China.

But they do decide other things--like the quality of education in this country. After all, the only thing at stake when legislatures and courts decide the fate of our schools is the future of our country.

Written in 1991.