

Texas can educate itself out of economic decline

By Bill Hobby

The teacher of the year at Stephen F. Austin Middle School in Galveston not long ago was Gayla Rhoads. It was a proud day for a woman who grew up as one of four sisters raised by a single mother in the Galveston housing projects.

Rhoads not only succeeded against the odds, she is helping others succeed. Now a special education teacher, she says, "I always want to help the child that has it the hardest. I want to pull those students from the very bottom and see them on top."

This exemplary teacher is a product of the Galveston Area Teacher Education Recruitment and Retention Program, which links the Galveston Independent School District, Galveston College and the University of Houston-Clear Lake. Because she now has a university degree, Rhoads is helping her community as a teacher, African-American children as a role model and the state as a taxpayer. Our challenge in higher education is to help more students succeed as Rhoads has. That will help our state meet the needs of a new century.

If we don't succeed, average household income in this state is likely to decline by \$3,000 in constant dollars by the year 2030. The minority population will grow, but their educational achievement will not. The requirements of the job market will increase, but the education level of the work force will decline.

It's a grim scenario, and one that has been aggravated by the failure of this state to adequately support higher education. Since 1985, state tax money spent per student in Texas has declined by 24 percent, from \$3,187 to \$2,408.

In that time, faculty salaries in Texas dropped below the national average. The percentage of part-time faculty in our classrooms increased.

Our tuition rates are still low, but since 1985 they have risen 700 percent.

Yet most Texas students receive only 60 percent of the assistance for which they qualify. Texas provides only 11 percent of total student aid, compared to 25 percent nationally.

Financial problems are a leading reason why students drop out of college. Just when we most need to provide access for more students, higher costs create a bigger barrier.

The Back to Basics proposal is unique in my 25-year experience in state government because it unites all the institutions of higher education and because it promises a specific return on the state's investment.

Or as Barry Thompson, chancellor of Texas A&M, puts it, "We decided to stop whining and come up with something positive. If we do not do something, the problems will become irreversible."

The Back to Basics proposal requests \$926 million additional over the next biennium to strengthen higher education. The key benefit, when fully implemented, would be 15,200 more bachelor's degrees granted per year, bringing Texas up to the national average.

This is what we pledge to produce during the next four years for that funding:

Public School Partnerships, \$71.6 million: Seventy-five thousand students a year improve their reading skills. Twelve thousand more students a year enroll in higher education.

The Community College/University Initiative, \$530.9 million: Increase retention of first-time freshmen by 20 percent. Increase transfers from community colleges to universities. Increase bachelor's degrees each year by 15,200.

Student Financial Assistance, \$91.5 million: Many of the 389,000 students in public institutions and 22,500 students in independent institutions who now receive financial aid would get larger stipends. More students could afford to enroll in colleges and universities.

Research and Workforce Development, \$100 million: Attract \$110 million more per year in federal or industry-sponsored research. Create 25 new or restructured technical/vocational programs per year.

Health Education and Research, \$132 million: Continue the current rate of growth.

We can educate our way out of economic decline, but we must start now. Every year lost is another grade of children who don't succeed, of students who give up on the hope of higher education or drop out of the university. We can't afford this failure.

If we can fund Back to Basics, we will have more university graduates like Gayla Rhoads, who says, "Living in the projects, or being black, or being poor, has nothing to do with what you can do or how you can help other people."

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