

By Bill Ratliff, Thomas Ratliff
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From time to time, we have the opportunity to speak to Rotary clubs in our district and other parts of the state. Each time we do, we get to recite the Rotary 4-way test.

Is it the truth?

Is it fair to all concerned?

Will it build good will and better friendships?

Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

It dawned on us to subject one of the most hotly debated educational topics, private school vouchers, to the Rotary 4-way test and see how it fares.

Is it the truth?

"Kids are trapped in low performing schools" is typically used as the biggest selling point for private school vouchers. Quite simply, this isn't true.

Under current Texas law and TEA rules, if a school district is ranked low performing for three years, that district's students can transfer to any other school in the district or a nearby school district, free of charge, as long as the chosen district has space available. This program has been in place for almost 20 years and is called the Public Education Grant Program.

Last year, students at 892 campuses across Texas could have

transferred from their home school under this provision at no charge to the parents. How many left their district? 1,694. That's 1.9 students per campus.

The truth is a "failing" district may be labeled "failing" due to one sub-group of students that may or may not affect other sub-groups of kids. For example, if the junior high Anglo math students perform poorly, the campus will receive a low rank, but that rank has nothing to do with how the elementary, high schools or other subjects at the junior high are doing, nor does it indicate how African American or Hispanic students are doing in junior high math. Labels can be deceiving.

Texas is home to many charter schools. These charter schools are public schools and are currently providing school choice to over 180,000 thousand students at over 500 campuses. There are an increasing number of choices available that keep students from being "trapped in failing schools." Bottom line, these kids aren't trapped and they choose to stay in their local school for a variety of reasons (economic, academic, athletic, family, work, transportation, etc.).

Strike 1 on the 4-way test.

The Rotary 4-way Test

Is it fair to all concerned?

If two students are given a \$6,000-\$8,000 voucher to take to the school of their choice, do they both have the same opportunity to use that voucher? The short answer is "no," they don't.

If Student A has his/her own car, or has a parent who owns a car and can take the student to another campus, the transportation issue is non-existent.

If Student B has no car, or his/her parents have no car and must rely on public transportation (if it even exists in their area), the transportation issue is a show-stopper, especially for younger students who aren't able to ride a city bus on their way to elementary school.

If Student A has special needs, are the same private schools available to him/her as Student B who does not have those needs and can pass the school's admissions test?

If Student A has economic resources available to bridge the gap between the \$6,000-\$8,000 voucher and the \$20,000-plus tuition at the private school of his/her choice, while Student B is one of the 61 percent of economically disadvantaged kids in our schools, do those students both have the same opportunity to use a voucher?

Strike 2 on the 4-way test.

Will it build good will and better friendships?

With the backdrop presented in the previous question, let's think

about the impact on kids and their families. While the smart, rich kids use their voucher to go to the elite private academy of their choice, those with special needs, economic limitations or other barriers have no choice. How will that build good will or better friendships?

When the elite private academies are able to choose the students they want and reject those they don't, how will that build good will and better friendships?

When private schools are able to operate with taxpayer funding but free from taxpayer transparency and accountability requirements like public schools, how will that build good will and better friendships?

When property values decline because the most "attractive" students are able to pursue an education at the elite private sector schools, leaving behind those students who don't perform as well on the state's standardized tests, how will that build good will and better friendships?

Strike 3 on the 4-way test.

Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

Putting aside student issues for one second, we often hear the so-called "experts" report, "Teachers will be paid more when schools compete for them" as one of the selling points for vouchers. How is this possible when virtually every private school and charter school currently pays less than the public schools? In fact, according to data

from the Texas Education Agency, charter schools currently pay their teachers an average of \$6,639 less than public schools because charter schools hire many uncertified teachers and teachers with fewer years of experience as a cost-saving measure, a fact overlooked by the "experts."

The fact is private schools pay less because they have a more "predictable" student body that doesn't have many of the same challenges as public schools. They don't have to pay the same salary as the public schools, so they don't.

So, based on these facts, the bottom line question is, "Would vouchers be beneficial to all concerned?" The answer is decidedly no, only a small handful of students might benefit, and many of those left out could find their schools negatively affected by the diversion of taxpayer funds to elite private academies.

Strike 4 on the 4-way test.

Let's all work to support and improve the public schools for all children, it's the only answer that passes the 4-way test and provides a bright future for Texas students.

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