

A brief history of Texas public education and why nonpartisan school boards are a tradition worth protecting

Media is buzzing with rhetoric right now about public education and the role of school boards.

Here's a quick look at how and why our nation's leaders developed a public education system with elected school boards at the helm.

Texans have always valued public education for their children. Just as important has been the belief that locally elected school boards are the best way to ensure that our public schools are accountable to their families and communities.

Since their founding, Texas public schools have fueled our state's growth and development. Let's ensure we can continue that tradition by understanding the history of public education and why local control and nonpartisan school boards are worth protecting.

Our founding fathers—both U.S. and Texas—viewed public schools as essential to our democracy.

Shortly after the American Revolution, a strong push for the creation of a publicly funded school system began. Both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams were leaders in these efforts, firmly believing that the stability of our democracy was dependent on an educated population.

Here in Texas, the idea that public education is a public good took hold before statehood when our founding fathers cited the Mexican Government's failure to establish a public school system among the reasons for their call for independence.

They also invoked Jefferson in 1876 when they established public education in the Texas Constitution, noting that a general diffusion of knowledge was essential to the preservation of the liberties and rights of Texans.



Public schools are the cornerstone of our democracy and essential to a strong Texas.

While school governance has evolved, the tradition of local control has stood the test of time.

In the early years of our nation, local school boards were often made up of lay persons vested with authority by their state. Many of these appointed boards not only governed their local schools, but also managed daily operations.

ARTICLE VII EDUCATION

THE PUBLIC FREE SCHOOLS

SEC. 1. SUPPORT AND MAINTENANCE OF SYSTEM OF PUBLIC FREE SCHOOLS.

A general diffusion of knowledge being essential to the preservation of the liberties and rights of the people, it shall be the duty of the Legislature of the State to establish and make suitable provision for the support and maintenance of an efficient system of public free schools. (Feb. 15, 1876.)

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By the early 1900s, in many parts of the country, paid administrators had taken over the daily operations of schools with school boards primarily shifting their focus to policymaking and governance.

Of course, the role of school boards has been discussed and debated over the years. Those conversations continue even today.

Yet even among the most heated debates, there's little disagreement about the importance of local control. This tradition dates to the beginning of public education both for our nation and state.

Thankfully, the tradition continues, especially here in Texas, where public school students are served in markedly diverse geographic settings with districts ranging in size from less than one square mile to nearly five thousand square miles. According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the district with the smallest enrollment in the state, San Vicente Independent School District (ISD), had a total enrollment of five students in 2020-21. In contrast, more than 196,000 students received instruction at 277 campuses in Houston ISD.

While the challenges and opportunities facing these two districts may be vastly different, their adherence to a local governance model connects them to each other and to all 1,029 districts across the state serving Texas' students and families.

In fact, in every region and town across the Lone Star State, community members are provided the opportunity to vote for their school board trustees to oversee their schools. Voting connects the individual citizen to the school in a direct and intimate way and gives the voters an opportunity to express their support or discontent for the school program.

This longstanding tradition, which has rightfully stood the test of time, is core to who we are as a state.



Government closest to the people governs best.

Keeping politics and education separate makes for stronger schools

In Texas, school boards have been decidedly non-partisan for over a century. School board elections were held in May to insulate them from the partisan elections in November. The thought was that one doesn't need to be a Republican or Democrat to fix a pothole; similarly, the task of educating ALL students is unrelated to politics.

Of course, that's changed in recent years with partisan battles increasingly playing out in school board races. Yet the history of school boards shows that these elected officials have long managed socially divisive issues.

Moving away from a tradition of non-partisanship threatens to weaken our public education system by distracting from the work at hand—namely educating children “without regard to wealth, birth or other accidental condition or circumstance,” as Thomas Jefferson proclaimed in 1779.

Partisan politics are a distraction. School boards should be focused on students, not the controversies of the day.

Today, more than ever, we need to be unified in our work to build better public schools and a stronger Texas.



Partisan politics divide school communities and hurt students.