

Star-Telegram FORT WORTH

Texas lawmakers have a chance to be true pioneers in education choice

Mack Morris

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Texas' pioneering spirit is one of the reasons I am proud to call the Lone Star State home.

But in one critically important area, the state continues to hold back innovation, choice and achievement: Education.

The sad fact is that Texas is far from cutting edge when it comes to empowering families through increased **educational choice**.

Dozens of other states have made strides in this area, but Texas has largely stayed stagnant.

As a result, hundreds of thousands of students are trapped in struggling schools, their futures darker than they otherwise would be.

Fortunately, educational reforms that expand choices and opportunities for families look to be a top issue during the upcoming Texas legislative session, and most promising of all is legislation creating **education savings accounts**.

These accounts would give parents more control over how they spend their education tax dollars so that they can choose education options that best fit their child's needs.

Five states have already adopted education savings account programs, with Arizona, Florida, and Nevada having the most robust programs.

The Texas program, as suggested by former Arlington state Rep. Kent Grusendorf, would most closely follow the **Nevada model**.

Enacted in 2015, the Nevada program enables nearly every parent to decide the best way to use the majority — 90 percent — of the money typically spent on their child in a public school.

Parents can choose to put the funds toward tutors, SAT prep, homeschool curriculum or private school, among other education costs.

In the short time the program has been in place, roughly **8,000** Nevada families have signed up.

Bringing education savings accounts to Texas would expand options for families across the state rather than constrain them to a one-size-fits-all model.

As it is now, Texas' education system is largely limited by a family's income bracket and zip code.

Children whose parents can afford to live in the best areas have access to private schools or the highest-performing public schools, while most others are left behind.

This may explain why Texas children's performance lags nationally.

Texas' fourth-grade students **rank** substantially behind the national average in their reading and writing skills, which often results in poor performance later on.

Indeed, students are struggling to compete with their peers nationally when it comes to college entrance exams, placing **45th** of the 50 states in average SAT scores.

But many students don't even make it to high school graduation.

But the good news is we know how to turn these numbers around.

According to Patrick Wolf, University of Arkansas distinguished professor of education policy, education savings account programs are one of the most effective ways to lower drop-out rates.

He **estimates** that if Texas adopted an education savings account program that went into effect in the fall of 2017, a total of 11,809 additional students would graduate by 2022 — and that number would likely increase over time.

Additionally, a recent Cato Institute **report** found that even among international education systems student achievement was tied to more school options.

But education savings accounts wouldn't simply help students who opt to use them; they would boost education quality in all schools, including traditional public schools.

Twenty-nine studies from across the nation have found that traditional public schools improve as a result of choice programs.

As a parent and taxpayer here in Texas, I believe that empowering parents with options is the key to improving education in our state.

Lawmakers can make education saving accounts a top priority this January.

Gov. Abbott has already **pledged** that he will sign the most "pro-school choice law" that comes to his desk.

It's hard to get more pro-school choice than returning education decisions to parents so that they can seek the best option for their child.

This upcoming legislative session provides lawmakers a chance to unleash educational innovation across the state, opening access to diverse learning opportunities that best serve student needs.

If they do so, it will be a landmark achievement for the next generation of Texas pioneers — regardless of their zip code or income bracket.