

# The Bonds That Tie

*“It’s for the Children!”*

by Ken Casper

That was the slogan for the proposal in 2007 when the school board asked for a \$125M bond. It failed, so they came back the following year and requested two bonds, one for \$117M and another for \$32M. The first one passed, the second failed. They found the money anyway. What have we learned?



- ✓ That bonds for education are a waste of money. Instead of academic quality improving, it went down. In the eight years from 2010 to 2017, the SAISD fell from the 53.9 percentile statewide to 37.5. Only 2 schools, Ft Concho and Glenmore, received 5-star ratings. Santa Rita slipped from 5 stars to 4. The other schools in the district got mostly 1s and a few 2s and 3s. One school received a zero!
- ✓ That new facilities don’t improve academic performance. There is no correlation between the age and condition of school facilities and test scores. Five-star-rated Ft Concho and Glenmore occupy old buildings. Bradford underwent major renovations, thanks to 2008 bond, but was rated 0, a failure.
- ✓ That when throwing money at education doesn’t work, school boards come back for more money. Having the 2007 bid for \$125M turned down didn’t discourage them from asking for \$149M the following year.
- ✓ That no one is accountable for poor performance. Test scores plummeted. The school district rating plummeted, but no one was fired, no one was held accountable. The only ones who suffered were the children.
- ✓ That school administration has no long-range plans. Within the last three years, windows were replaced and new HVAC units installed in schools that were then put on the demolition list.
- ✓ That the school board has no priorities, only shopping lists of things to ask more money for. The current bond request lists “objectives” ranked by need from presentations given to the committee, however, once the money is appropriated, the board is under no obligation to spend it in the priority order in which it was justified.
- ✓ That “It’s for the Children” is a good advertising slogan for raising taxes. Unfortunately, the children aren’t getting better educated, but they are being burdened with enormous debt for the next 25 years. They will be paying for the 2008 bond until 2034. If this \$149K bond passes our children and grandchildren won’t be paying it off until 2043.
- ✓ That people pulling down \$100K a year or more think of \$15.32 (the monthly property tax hike) in terms of lattes and croissants. It’s hardly an inconvenience.
- ✓ That for people earning \$50K or less a year, \$15.32 represents a chicken and vegetables that will feed a hungry family of four.
- ✓ That working people think of a \$149M school bond as a debt they and their children will have to pay off in higher taxes.
- ✓ That bankers, lawyers, builders, real-estate brokers and businessmen think of that same \$149M school bond in terms of an opportunity; how many times it will turn over in the local economy.

- ✓ That if this bond fails, it will be repackaged and presented again next year.
- ✓ That pass or fail, the school board will be back in ten years with another \$149M school bond request (adjusted for inflation, of course) and an accompanying tax increase.

Our community is already strapped with enormous debt and high taxes. Now we are being asked to pile on still more. \$94M still remains to be paid on the 2008 SAISD school bond. If this new bond passes, the total indebtedness of the school district will be \$334M, a burden we will be passing on to our children and grandchildren.

Another serious concern is whether the money will be spent wisely. In 2007-2008 we were assured the massive infusion of capital was absolutely necessary to improve and maintain high academic standards, only to see SAISD's academic rating drop dramatically—15 percentage points. The impulse to throw money at a problem is a badly misguided one. Nothing is going to change academically until administrators and teachers take a long, hard, honest look at what they are teaching and how they are teaching it. Buildings and facilities have nothing to do with it, something I think we all know instinctively. It's so much easier, though, and more profitable for some to play with other people's money and calculate how many times it will turn over in the local marketplace.

If this bond fails, there are two things the school board must do in conjunction with the administration of each school: draw up a list of priorities and develop a long-range plan. The current system pays lip service to both but lacks teeth because buildings that have recently received major renovations and repairs are now being identified for demolition and rebuilding. Other projects, while nice to have, like a 3,000 seat multipurpose center at Central HS, are not essential and won't improve academic performance.

Once that list is compiled, develop a long-range plan in three parts:

1. Security and Safety. This will always be at the top of any list. It is unfortunate that controlled access points and armed guards are necessary on school campuses today, but they are.
2. Items directly impacting academic performance. These might include classroom reconfigurations and technological upgrades.
3. Non-academic changes. These could range from new or upgraded sports facilities to paving parking lots.

Thus far the SAISD has failed in its primary mission, which is to educate and train students to be active, productive members of the community. Too many people, including members of the school board, focus on the economic impact of having a vigorous, highly competitive sports program. That's icing on the cake. The memories and friends made at such events are nice to have, but memories and friends are personal responsibilities and infinitely variable. The lessons learned in the classroom are much more valuable for earning a living and safeguarding the values that make us Americans. It comes down once more to priorities.