

# **Educational Failure**

By Ken Casper

The San Angelo Independent School District Board of Trustees has seven members, one for each of the six individual districts and a member at large. Most of them have been serving for more than a decade, some for twice that. They serve a four-year term without pay, meet in open session twice a month and spend many more hours of private time keeping up with what's going on locally and at the state level. They control a budget of more than \$140M annually, and affect the lives of 15,000 students.

Since the establishment of the Department of Education under President Jimmy Carter in 1978 the term 'independent' in ISD has become a misnomer. The entangling bureaucratic interference by state and federal education agencies has complicated the functioning of our public school system and done almost irreparable harm.

Pedagogical experiments like New Math, Common Core and C-Scope have not only left our young people unable to perform the basic skills their grandparents had mastered by the third grade, but in many cases the children have been handicapped for life. A child who can't read at grade-level by the end of the third grade is unlikely to ever catch up—in any subject. That's how critical literacy is.

A prime example of how irresponsible our educational system has become is the recent decision to drop cursive writing. Fortunately the public outcry and corporate demands have reversed that foolishness, at least in some places. How do you sign your name if you can't write? Are we to be reduced to X's in signature blocks? Stop and think about what is lost by not being able to read and write in cursive: virtually every handwritten letter, card and note written by

parents, grandparents and members of the older generation becomes illegible! If you want to destroy a culture's history—and its identity—robbing it of literacy is the most effective way to do it.

Here in San Angelo we like to think we're exceptions to the decline and fall of public education in this country and this state, that the kids attending our public schools are well prepared for the future. Unfortunately, it's not true. Our children are not being adequately taught even the basic fundamentals in English and Mathematics. About 50% of the graduates of SAISD have to take remedial courses in English and Math—at their own expense—in order to qualify for entrance into degree-awarding courses at Angelo State University and Howard College.

This is unacceptable, but it's not a new development. SAISD was once one of the top ten districts in the state. Its decline began in the 1970s. In the last ten years SAISD has dropped from the 51<sup>st</sup> percentile, that is, it was better than half the school districts in Texas, to the 28<sup>th</sup> percentile, meaning almost three-quarters of the school districts in our state are better academically than San Angelo. Of the 973 school districts, San Angelo ranks 697<sup>th</sup>. (Source: schooldigger.com.)

Whose fault is this alarming decline? Teachers? Principals? Superintendents? There's no question they all share to some degree in the deterioration of one of the hallmarks of America's historic achievements. But the buck stops at the school board. They hire the superintendent. They budget and allocate funds. They approve pay raises. They have the power to say yea or nay to academic and non-academic programs, whether developed locally or "encouraged" by the state. One thing they haven't been is independent. Virtually every decision by the board is passed unanimously.

It's time for change. It's time for new blood, new ideas and a willingness to say No! to

programs and experiments that sound good on paper but which in fact do nothing but frustrate good teachers and dumb-down students.

Chris Giroux is running for the member-at-large position on the San Angelo School Board of Trustees. A member-at-large is elected by all the residents of the entire school district.

- Chris Giroux is highly qualified for a place on the Board of Trustees. He's worked for the school district. He knows their strengths and weaknesses from the inside.

- The father of three school-age children, Chris Giroux keeps well-informed about school affairs and focuses on solutions, not endless analyses of issues and self-serving excuses.

- He firmly believes it's the school board's responsibility to ensure academic standards are set and met. Chris has specific plans for reversing SAISD's downward trend in academic achievement. For example, he will work to ensure the last vestiges of failed educational programs like Common Core and New Math are permanently removed from the curricula. He wants to take the shackles off teachers, to empower them to use their most effective teaching skills and love of learning to raise their students' academic achievements.

- A fiscal conservative, Chris believes teachers and key staff members should receive pay raises based on merit, on their performance and accomplishments, not the across-the-board increases they have been getting in recent years.

“All of our students deserve a quality education,” Chris reminds people, “regardless of the part of town they come from.” That's not being done now.

For example, do away with bi-lingual education—and don't say it isn't happening, because it is. Instead of language aids insuring students, whose first language is not English, understand what's being taught, they are translating lessons into the other language. Proof? If at the end of the first school year they aren't speaking English, it's because they have not been

incentivized to learn it. Kids pick up languages quickly and easily if they are immersed in them. We need to stop handicapping minority children by treating them differently.

Not all high school graduates want to, or need to, go to college, nor is a college degree a pass to a high-paying job. Chris is a master electrician who owns his own business, but when he wanted to recruit workers from among high-school seniors who were taking SAISD sponsored vocational courses at Howard, he was discouraged from doing so. “They don’t know anything. Vocational training is goof-off time.” That has to change. There are many skills and crafts that pay in the high 5-digit dollar range and that can go into six-figures. We need to give those students who want to enter directly into the work force the training and skills they need to get good jobs upon graduation. Local businesses are advertising to hire welders, drivers and fitters and are in some cases offering bonuses or other incentives to experienced craftsmen. Not only are the wages good, but there is no backbreaking college debt.

Discipline is key to learning. The classroom needs to be free of distractions. Students should not have cell phones in the classroom. Teaching is an arduous enough job without teachers having to compete with cell phones, games and other disruptions and disturbances.

Homework is another key element in schooling. SAISD students are not allowed to take text books home for independent study. They are assigned no homework. The argument that there are not enough books for 15,000 students is bogus. For generations school kids have been given books to take home, to handle responsibly, and for parents to review and help with. If an annual budget of \$140 million is not enough to furnish our children with their own text books, something is wrong. Academics is priority #1. It’s why schools exist.

Security. The current administration is gambling on the safety and security of students by installing fences and cameras. Fences don’t stop bullets in an active shooter scenario, but they do

pen victims in. Cameras don't prevent violence either. They only document the carnage. The school board has to take security more seriously. Statements like: "We're on very good terms with the police. They can be here in 90 seconds," even if it is true, should be unacceptable to every parent. A lot of harm can be committed, including multiple murders, in 90 seconds. More options must be considered, including authorizing willing and well-trained teachers and staff members to carry concealed weapons. Only other teachers and staff members should know who they are. Yes, it's sad that such a thing is necessary in our country in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it is. We have a moral obligation and a legal right to protect our children in the most effective way. Failure to do so is unconscionable.

These issues are just the tip of the iceberg of a failing educational system. Until the school board is willing to put academics first, establish high standards, realistic and achievable goals, and demand positive results, SAISD will continue to fail its students and the community, while taxpayers, who foot the bill, will be burdened with ever-increasing property taxes.

None of these issues can even begin to be resolved without a change in the current board. That's why we have to elect Chris Giroux to the at-large seat on the San Angelo school board of trustees.

Can he turn the school district's steady decline in academic performance around single-handed? No, but he can signal the start of its recovery to the place where our children deserve it to be. He can exercise the kind of leadership the board has been lacking for far too long.

Vote for Chris Giroux for At-Large Member on the San Angelo ISD Board of Trustees on May 4<sup>th</sup>.

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*Ken Casper was born and raised in New York City. He joined the Air Force, served in Japan, Vietnam, and Germany as well as various stateside assignments before retiring in San Angelo, Texas. An active member and past-president of the San Angelo TEA Party, Ken is also the author of more than twenty-five novels.*