

A Different Perspective:

A Response to...

Educational Failure

*By Ami Mizell-Flint
SAISD Trustee*



I am writing this in response to Ken Casper's essay, "Educational Failure."

I am a trustee of the school board Mr. Casper mentions in his article, serving my second term on the San Angelo ISD board. While I respect and appreciate the time Mr. Casper spends researching politics, and education in particular, I respectfully submit that several of his facts are not completely accurate. I am writing to give Christian Reporter News readers another perspective on some of those claims.

While he is correct that several of San Angelo ISD's board members have served for more than a decade, I retort that they have done so successfully. San Angelo ISD has seen many successes through the collaborative effort of this group of people, all of whom are passionate about the success of students in SAISD.

Academically, our Speech and Debate students go to national competition year after year. Our academic UIL competitors consistently earn top ratings in the state as well. In athletics, the Central HS girls' gymnastics team has won regional championships for the past 18 years. Both girls and boys are constant contenders at state competition. High school teams are successful in many different sports. Both high school bands and orchestras have reached the point where superior ratings are expected year after year. These points are important, because research has shown that students involved in extra-curricular activities are stronger academically and more successful post-high school.

Like districts across the State of Texas, SAISD does not use Common Core or C-Scope. As with everything, education evolves and the "new math" our students are learning may look different than techniques prior generations learned in school, but these changes are research based, and are designed to teach children to apply math in a changing world.

Currently, schools are educating students for careers that don't even exist yet. They must learn to problem solve, think critically, and understand a world that is literally changing before our eyes. Using methods to teach that were used 50 years ago will not benefit them in the world in which they will be living in the next 50 years.

While some districts across the country stopped teaching cursive, San Angelo ISD has never stopped teaching it. My current college students learned it, my eighth-grader learned it, and my third-grader is a new cursive writer.

I take great exception to Mr. Casper's claim that SAISD students are "not being adequately taught even the basic fundamentals of English and Mathematics." While it is true that STAAR test results have not been as strong as the previous TAKS test scores were, the two tests are not comparable. Most recently, independent research has shown that the reading passages on the test are two years above the grade level of the students taking it. Aside from that, however, the "test," and the ratings that have come along with it, have always been a challenge for educators. When a school does well on the test, they are "teaching to the test." When a school does not do as well, they are "failing." While we all know that ratings for schools come from tests that show a snapshot of a couple of days in a school year, we as a board, and I as a parent, believe that what is more important is what happens the other 35 ½ weeks of that school year.

However, if you want to look at test scores, let's look at some key areas where SAISD is outperforming other students in the state:

- **Students completing 9+ hours of Dual Credit courses at the high school level**
State 19% SAISD 42%
- **Students completing a CTE Coherent Sequence**
State 51% SAISD 57% SAISD Eco Dis 59%
- **Advanced Placement Exam Results**
State ELAR 41%/M 51% SAISD ELAR 54%/M 59%
- **SAT Scores**
State All 1019 SAISD All 1065
Eng 512/M 507 Eng 537/528
- **Advanced Dual Credit Course Completion**
State 37% SAISD 45%

In addition, Mr. Casper's statistic about 50% of SAISD graduates having to take remedial classes in English and Math is incorrect; that number is actually 12%, which is actually considered a successful percentage.

While Mr. Casper spreads blame of the "alarming decline" of our education across teachers, principals and superintendents, I, along with the other trustees, thank them for all they do for our students. Teachers, principals, and our superintendent spend countless hours in school, after school, and during breaks preparing their lessons, grading papers, contacting parents, contacting students, and integrating technology into it all.

I do agree with Mr. Casper when he said the buck stops with the board, as we hire the superintendent. We are very proud of the choice we made in Dr. Dethloff. I have spoken to school board trustees across the State of Texas and from other states, all of whom were amazed at the seamless transition after Dr. Bonds retired.

Mr. Casper is also correct that we allocate the funds. For the past 16 years, SAISD has achieved the highest rating possible, "superior," in the state financial accountability rating system of Texas (FIRST). Also, under the guidance of Dr. Jeff Bright, our district's budget has

been balanced, occasionally even with a small surplus, every year. There are many districts across the state who can not say the same.

Yes, we approve pay raises. We have been fortunate that we have been able to provide pay raises for our teachers by 2-3% every year that I have been on the board. If I had the option, and the district had the funds, that raise would be doubled, or even tripled. Teachers do so much more than teach our kids and deserve much more than our district is able to pay them.

We have been so thankful that, unlike other districts across the country, we have not cut fine-arts programs; rather, they are thriving in San Angelo ISD. This past year, in response to lower-than-desired test scores in three of our schools, the board voted to implement multiple measures to help aid success at every one of our campuses.

I also agree with Mr. Casper's statement that not all students want to or need to go to college. Our district has a wonderful partnership with Howard College, where hundreds of students take career and technical education (CTE) classes each year. These classes allow students to graduate with a certificate in a particular area, making them "career ready" the day they graduate from high school. In fact, 57% of our students completed their sequence of CTE classes last year, a 25% increase over the previous year.

Regarding students not having textbooks, most textbooks used in our schools now offer digital access, where students can access them at home or on buses while traveling. If students need a physical textbook, all they have to do is ask. Last year, my son asked his math teacher for a text book to use, and he was given one to keep at home without question.

Finally, Mr. Casper, the reason that our decisions have been unanimous has nothing to do with our inability to think for ourselves; rather, they have come as a result of discussing the issues and realizing how they affect our one common agenda- our students. Almost always, we find that, when we keep our students at the center of our decisions, we have the same opinion. The few times we have had trouble deciding which way to go on a given issue, Mr. Layman, the board president that our board has elected every year for the six years I have served, asks, "What is the best decision for kids?" Typically, that question brings us to a unanimous decision.

Is there room for improvement in San Angelo ISD? Of course. Every organization can be improved. The board is constantly looking at ways to improve, and we make those changes as needed. Is our system "failing?" Absolutely not. There are many areas of success, both academic and extra-curricular, in which our district and our community should be very proud.

Ami Mizell-Flint has lived in San Angelo since 1998. She is active in the community and serves as the San Angelo ISD District 4 trustee. She is also president of Congregation Beth Israel, secretary of the Be Theatre board, and a Girl Scout leader, and a freelance writer for several local publications. She has four children, two of whom graduated from SAISD and are currently attending ASU, and two who are current students of SAISD.