

Rebutt to the Rebuttal

Part 3 in this Series

By Ken Casper

In Response to Mrs. Mizell-Flint:

First, I want to thank Mrs. Mizell-Flint for her thoughtful and thought-provoking response to my article “Educational Failure.” She made excellent points.



Mrs. Mizell-Flint boasts of the accomplishments of Speech and Debate students, of UIL ratings, the girls’ gymnastics team, etc. These are all admirable endeavors, deserving of praise, but they are voluntary, extracurricular activities representing a very small segment of the school population. They are not academic matters which is what my article was about, nor do they represent the majority of students.

Mrs. Mizell-Flint states emphatically that SAISD does not use Common Core or C-Scope, but she contradicts herself when she notes that “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 changed world.” Apparently, she doesn’t know new math is a product of Common Core.

As she notes, mathematical problems in today’s world may differ from those of yesterday, but $2 + 2$ still equals 4. Any other answer is wrong. $2 + 2$ is not a process, it’s a fact. It was true yesterday. It is true today, and it will be true tomorrow. It doesn’t take half a piece of paper for calculations and theoretical science to come up with the answer, nor is there such a thing as almost right or “approaches standard.” $2 + 2 = 3.999$ is not almost right. It is wrong.

I understand Mrs. Mizell-Flint’s objection to my statement that “SAISD students are not being adequately taught even the basic fundamentals of English and Mathematics.” Yet she also admits that the remedial-class rate in English and Math is 12% “which is considered a successful percentage.”

Here again, Mrs. Mizell-Flint is cherry-picking statistics. She is looking at the percentage of advanced students who take dual-credit courses, i.e., college-level courses in high

school—the same group she recognizes above who go on to prestigious/ivy-league colleges. I'm looking at the bigger picture of all graduates, including those who need remedial training upon admission to ASU and Howard. The point, which I'm afraid Mrs. Mizell-Flint has missed is that all high school graduates should be competent on Day One in such elementary subjects as English and Math. Twelve percent being unprepared in those subjects should be as unacceptable as 45-50%.

What Mrs. Mizell-Flint also fails to mention is that Lincoln Junior High has been designated as a Public Education Grant (PEG) school by the state because it has failed to meet academic standards for three years in a row. Parents of students attending PEG schools can request their children be transferred to better schools within the district or even outside the district. The state has also designated Glenn Middle School, as well as Bowie and Goliad Elementary Schools as "needs improvement" in meeting academic standards. Those schools have not yet reached the three-years-in-a-row PEG level, but they are on the downhill slope.

An indicator of parental dissatisfaction with the poor academic quality of SAISD schools is the number of students, more than 2,000 every year, who transfer to other school districts like Veribest, Paintrock, Christoval, as well as the Texas Leadership Charter Academy (TLCA).

TLCA started off in 2009 with an enrollment authorization of 250 students, which was quickly raised to 1,000 even before it opened its doors because of the number of enrollment applications. Today TLCA has 1,400 students on its San Angelo campus. This charter school has also formed an alliance with a local church to offer an after-school program for homework assistance, as well as summer-school remediation classes.

Academic deficiencies are costing SAISD money. Each student transferring to TLCA or other school districts takes about \$7,000 out of our school district. That represents roughly \$14M per year.

In her letter, Mrs. Mizell-Flint points out that tests are only "snapshot" evaluations and that standards of measurement have changed over the years. These arguments are invalid for two reasons: first, all the other schools take the same tests; second, the pattern of decline by SAISD has been consistent over the years. In 2011 SAISD was rated academically in the 51st percentile of the school districts in Texas. Today it's rated in the 28th percentile. (Source: schooldigger.com)

The contention that "schools are educating students for careers that don't even exist yet" and that students "must learn to problem solve, think carefully, and understand a world that is literally changing before our eyes..." would be a true statement if it said "schools should be educating students..." Unfortunately, they are not. Ask businesspeople downtown how well SAISD graduates are able to do even the most elementary jobs. The vast majority of merchants will say SAISD graduates are poorly prepared to perform some of the most basic and simple tasks, like tallying a tab or

counting out change, if the computer/cash register goes down.

Let me add a note about teachers' pay. I think we can all agree that good teachers deserve good pay, and we have some truly wonderful teachers in SAISD. But let's not be naïve. Not all of them are. Across-the-board pay raises reward poor teachers equally as good teachers. Consequently, bad teachers have no incentive to improve, and good teachers are denied rewards they justly deserve for jobs well done.

Principals and other school officials know who the good teachers are. (If they don't, they should be removed from their supervisory positions.) Proof is in the evaluations they write on teachers every year. The argument, therefore, that a mobile student body with varying talents and levels of accomplishment make it impossible to determine which teachers deserve merit pay raises is bogus. A difficult task at times, perhaps, but certainly not impossible. It takes leadership and occasionally thick skin, but merit pay raises are absolutely necessary if we are to improve the quality of instruction our children receive.

I might also add that the legislature is currently considering giving all teachers an across-the-board \$5K a year pay raise. Keep in mind that the state may pick up the tab for the first two years, but after that it will become another unfunded mandate, which means school taxes will have to be raised.

Despite differences on the issues discussed above, as Mrs. Mizell-Flint noted, she and I are probably more in agreement than disagreement. Our goals are certainly the same—a better education for San Angelo children. Academics is the reason we send our kids to school.

I respect the members of the school board. They've dedicated long hours to improve our school system. I think however, they're focused on the wrong goals. Certainly, we need to renovate/replace a few aged facilities—which we are doing piecemeal. We should continue along that course.

Now it's time to focus on the most important educational issue: academic excellence.