

Cheri Isett Personal Privilege Speech before the Texas House on May 12, 2006

Members

I recognize that I am the most junior members of the House and for me to speak in this manner, I know, is highly unusual. However, this may be the only opportunity I have to address this body on a matter that I feel is of utmost importance and lies deep within my heart. In fact, what I'm about to say to you, I believe, is so important that I'm going to read it rather than speak freely as I'm accustomed to doing.

HB1 is a good bill. I am wholeheartedly behind reducing and restraining the growth on the egregious burden of property taxes in Texas. I was glad to vote for it. Carl stayed up way past his bedtime to watch the passage of HB1 and be a part of this historic legislation which you all have worked so hard on.

But there is something in this bill which grieves my heart. Something I believe we will pay dearly for in generations to come. That is the education reform measures which, although well meaning, will be to the detriment of Texas children. I am eager to see Texas children grow and increase in knowledge and education. My goodness, I have seven of them. I earnestly desire for the generation being raised up now to have greater opportunities than there were for the generation before them. But I believe we are on a misguided path with increases in standardized testing and mandated course work.

I know, we all know, the utter frustration from parents and teachers and students over increased regiments and standardized testing. I believe we would all agree that studying to a test and regurgitating is not a true education. We would all agree that the minds of Albert Einstein, Ben Franklin, Thomas Edison, Samuel Morse, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Michael Dell would never have tolerated such infliction upon them. They would never have allowed their creativity and their courage to step into unknown territories to be held back by the boxes that we force our school children to conform into.

These children were created by God to be unique individuals with unique gifts and talents. They are aching to break free from the tyranny of standardized tests and curriculum "scope and sequence" and express those gifts and talents. But we have legislated them out. We have told the artist that he has to pull back and cut back on blossoming in his chosen art because he doesn't have time. He has to take another math and science class. We have told the very, very bright entrepreneur that his pursuits are worthless because he is not a good test taker and pulls our school ratings down. We have told our teachers that they are not good teachers and don't deserve merits for their efforts because the artists and entrepreneurs in their classes don't deliver the goods in test results.

There is a whole world of knowledge and all of history to study. We could never impart all of it to every child. There's just too much of it. So who has the right to determine what body of knowledge has merit. Who was it anyway that said "every seventh grader needs to know all the parts of the cell and their function." Why is that more important

than, say, the intricacies of weather systems. And why are either of those more important than any other body of knowledge which delights the heart of a child. Who gives merit to one body of knowledge over another. And yet, through our essential skills and standardized tests, we praise one type of learner and condemn another. We tell our classroom teachers that it doesn't matter that you want to reach the heart of a child. We want you to mold his mind to conform to what *we* believe is a productive, college-prepped student.

I challenge you, Members, in sessions to come as you discuss these crucially important matters, to break out of the box. We can no longer afford to measure education success in terms of test results and rigorous curriculum. In that arena, countries like China clearly have us beat. They are disciplined, they are structured, they can produce multiples of what we can produce cheaper – not better, but more of it and cheaper.

The one thing other cultures lack which we possess and which we must fight to hold on to is creativity, imagination, and courage. These are the things which we must foster in education if our children and our nation are to survive. We need minds that are nurtured in discovery, not rote memorization. We need individuals who are able to muster the courage to go where others have never gone. We need to quit trying to cookie cutter every child in Texas schools and let the God given, God led creativity and excellence flow out. We need to trust teachers to do what they have been called to do and quit micro-managing them. When it comes to accountability measures in exchange for state funding, we need to hold school administrators responsible for their stewardship of those monies, not place the onerous burden of performance on the shoulders of those who at this point are victims in this debate, the students and their teachers. We need to quit telling parents that their child is a failure because he's not raising our school's ratings with his test results.

What I'm challenging you with will in itself require creativity and courage to do. In the sessions to come, I'm challenging you to trust that children are naturally curious and creative. Trust that if we as adults get out of their way, they will discover and grow in their world every bit as much between the ages of 6 and 18 as they did from birth to age 5. We need to give the teachers *in their classrooms* the support and discretionary funding to explore and discover with their students. Not funding for more bureaucracy, but funding to buy state of the art equipment to learn on, funding to backpack over Guadalupe Peak, funding to build a boat from scratch and sail it across a big lake. We need to appreciate the value of apprenticeships and accordingly, to loosen child labor laws enough to provide for them. We need to stop burdening children with standardized testing which we would all have to honestly agree is not the measure of a true education.

Members, this is a big challenge. I've seen more intellectual firepower in this room in the last three weeks than I've ever seen in one place before. For the sake of our children, for the sake of our nation let's use that firepower to find a better, more creative, more productive way to approach education reform than the road we've been on.

Thank you for allowing me to speak from my heart.

Mr. Speaker.