



TEXAS
FREEDOM
NETWORK

NETWORK NEWS

A MAINSTREAM VOICE TO COUNTER THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT · WWW.TFN.ORG · WINTER 2007

Voters last year registered their growing disgust with far-right candidates and their radical agenda – even in Texas! Will mainstream values finally return to center stage at the state Capitol in 2007?

The **Texas Freedom Network** looks to the year ahead with reasons for optimism, but great challenges remain.

Elections Bring New Opportunities

Our optimism is based on the strong showing by mainstream candidates in last year's elections. In the March primary elections, moderate Republicans finally began to fight back against the extremists who have hijacked their party. They won big victories against incumbents and others who support private school vouchers and other schemes that would undermine neighborhood public schools. Even voucher sugar daddy James Leininger's millions of dollars in campaign contributions couldn't save some of his chosen candidates from defeat.

The general election also saw victories for moderates in both major political parties. As a result, voucher supporters lost at least nine House races last year. Clearly, Texas voters sent a strong message to the far right: *Stop the attacks on our neighborhood public schools.*

Challenges Remain

Even so, great challenges remain. Far-right lawmakers have already made their legislative goals clear. Their extremist agenda includes:



- renewing efforts to pass a reckless private school voucher scheme;
- restricting stem cell research and its potential benefits for patients suffering from incurable diseases such as diabetes and Parkinson's;
- barring gay and

lesbian families from adopting or serving as foster parents; and

- attacking religious freedom by promoting the religious views of far-right extremists over the beliefs of all others.

TFN will join with re-energized moderates at the Capitol to turn back the far right's dangerous agenda on these and other issues. Read more about TFN's key legislative issues in 2007 on page 4.

State Board of Education

The State Board of Education remains one of the biggest challenges in 2007. Last year's elections gave the religious right a majority on the board for the first time. This alarming development comes as the board begins revising the state's curriculum standards – including science standards dealing with evolution.

Far-right board members failed in their efforts to water down the discussion of evolution and place material on creationism in biology textbooks in 2003. Now they will control the process for revising the standards on which those textbooks are based.

COME TO
**TFN
LOBBY
DAY**

March 26 in Austin
Details at www.tfn.org

What You Can Do

TFN needs your help! You can support mainstream values at the state Capitol and the State Board of Education. Go to www.tfn.org and find out how to:

- ✓ Sign up for a Rapid Response Team. TFN will call on team members to contact their legislators, write letters to the editor and take other important actions as legislation moves through the House and Senate.
- ✓ Stay informed by signing up for TFN News Clips.
- ✓ Donate and support our efforts at the Capitol and the State Board of Education.
- ✓ Sign up to volunteer. TFN offers a variety of volunteer opportunities throughout the year around the state.
- ✓ Come to Austin for TFN's legislative Lobby Day on March 26.

A note from President Kathy Miller



News reporters wrote little about how the debate over vouchers played a key role in the recent race for speaker of the Texas House of Representatives. Speaker Tom Craddick, R-Midland, narrowly beat back a challenge from Rep. Jim Pitts, R-Waxahachie, for re-election to that top House post.

During the days leading up to the House vote on vouchers in 2005, Speaker Craddick relied on his full arsenal of strong-arm tactics. His top tactic was having San Antonio businessman James Leininger – whose obsession is private school vouchers – threaten House members with well-funded election opponents if they didn't vote for vouchers.

Many legislators, including dozens from his own party, told Speaker Craddick that a vote for vouchers was a vote against the best interests of their districts. But the speaker forced a vote anyway. In the end, the House voted down the voucher scheme – the first public floor defeat of Speaker Craddick's agenda. But House members were angered by the strong-arm tactics on vouchers as well as other issues.

That anger fueled opposition to the re-election of Mr. Craddick as speaker this year. While he won re-election in the end, the challenge to his leadership should send a clear message: members of the Texas House aren't interested in passing vouchers this session. We will have to wait to see if the speaker got the message.

On the other side of the Capitol, we're seeing a new tactic by voucher supporters in the Texas Senate. Sen. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, has been promoting a voucher program for children with autism, similar to a program in Ohio. In Florida and Utah similar tactics have been used to get an initial voucher program passed, focusing on vouchers for children with special needs. Texas clearly needs to do more to help families of children with autism, but draining funds from the special education budgets of our public schools and using them to fund vouchers at unaccountable private schools would only make things worse. Groups that advocate for people with disabilities have echoed our opposition to this voucher scheme.

In the meantime, pro-voucher forces have scheduled a lobby day at the Capitol on Feb. 7, and Catholic schools around the state plan to close for the day so students and their parents can attend. As you can see, vouchers will continue to be a hot issue at the legislature.

We need your help! If you haven't already done so, sign up for our Defend Neighborhood Schools Rapid Response Team at www.tfn.org. Stay informed and respond to our calls to action as voucher legislation moves forward at the Capitol. And plan to attend TFN's lobby day on March 26 to meet with your own legislators and let them know that their constituents are watching their vote on this and other critical issues.



Hello, Jo-Hannah!

Jo-Hannah Whitsett joined TFN in December as the new political director. Jo-Hannah has a bachelor's and a master's of business administration from St. Edward's University. She brings experience as an education lobbyist and a state Senate staffer. Jo-Hannah has worked actively to keep private school vouchers from undermining Texas public schools as well as scrutinizing the religious-right bloc on the State Board of Education. Welcome to TFN, Jo-Hannah!



Hello, Val!

Val Benavidez joins TFN as the new outreach and field director. Val isn't new to TFN – she joined the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund Board of Directors in 2005. She brings a wealth of experience to the position, working most recently as the senior field organizer for the League of Young Voters. Welcome to the TFN team, Val!

A GIFT HAS BEEN GIVEN...

In honor of
Dan Brannon and Phil Durst
by Rick Levy and Lynn Rubinet

In memory of
Nina M. Kendrick
by Terry Weldon and Rona Aduna



T E X A S
F R E E D O M
N E T W O R K

P.O. Box 1624 / Austin, TX 78767
Phone: 512/322-0545
Fax: 512/322-0550
tfn@tfn.org / www.tfn.org

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Diane Ireson, Chair
Robert Kendrick, Vice Chair
Dale Linebarger, Treasurer
Paula Arnold, Secretary
James Aldrete
Rev. Dr. Larry Bethune
Rev. Valda Jean Combs
James Douglas
Phyllis Dunham
Phil Durst
Rhonda Gerson
Diana Herrera
Marguerite Hoffman
Donna Howard
Laura Ruth Jacks
Marcia Johnson
Jesse H. Jones II
Audrey Kaplan
Neal Manne
Dr. Lynn Markle
Deedee Ostfeld
Ann Parrish
Cecile Richards
Rev. Dr. Jim Rigby
Tanya Voss
Tom Weber

President: Kathy Miller

Outreach and Field Director:
Valerie Benavidez

Outreach Coordinator: Ian Davis

Development Director: Rachel Glast

Communications Director: Dan Quinn

Office Manager: Bryan Treat

Faith Network Director,

Deputy Communications Director:

Ryan Valentine

Political Director: Jo-Hannah Whitsett

Interns: Judie Niskala, Naveen Shakir,

Sara Struckman

Newsletter Designer: Julia Austin

Network News is the official newsletter of the
Texas Freedom Network.

A LOOK BACK AT 2006: Texas Freedom Network's Report to Members

GROUNDBREAKING ORIGINAL RESEARCH

TFN spent the spring carefully documenting – and exposing to the press – the unprecedented political contributions of James Leininger, the man on a fanatical mission to bring school vouchers to Texas (and pack the Legislature with religious extremists in the process). Despite the millions of dollars (!) he spent in this year's elections alone, Leininger-backed candidates were unsuccessful in many of their races.

The **Texas Freedom Network Education Fund** also published two full-length original reports this year. In April TFNEF released the first in a planned series of annual reports on the "State of the Religious Right" in Texas. **The Anatomy of Power** exposed the key people and organizations behind the religious right's rise to power in Texas, detailing the money, pressure groups and infrastructure behind the movement's remarkable political success.

Then in September, TFNEF released its comprehensive survey of elective Bible courses in Texas public school. **Reading, Writing & Religion** revealed that most existing courses fail to meet basic academic standards and are little more than devotional classes for fundamentalist Christians in our public school classrooms. The report, authored by Dr. Mark Chancey of Southern Methodist University, has established TFNEF as one of the foremost authorities on this controversial issue and provided a valuable resource to school boards considering these courses all over the country.



Author Michelle Goldberg addresses TFN members at the San Antonio Speaker Series event in November.

TFN HITS THE ROAD

TFN's first-ever statewide speaker series played to rave reviews around the state, bringing nationally known speakers and thoughtful, engaging discussions to Austin, Houston, Fort Worth and San Antonio. All told, more than 1,200 people participated in the **2006 Faith & Freedom Speaker Series**.

Additionally, the Texas Freedom Network led a standing-room only workshop at the state Democratic convention in Fort Worth. **Challenging the Religious Right: Restoring Faith in Texas** proved once and for all that progressives are passionate about their politics *and* their faith.

PROTECTING FAITH FROM PARTISAN POLITICS

In an election year marked by divisive efforts to drag churches into partisan political campaigns, the Texas Faith Network organized religious leaders around the state to offer a principled, public response. The **Respect Our Faith** campaign encouraged congregations to engage in healthy

civic and political involvement, but it also denounced partisan political activities that are disrespectful of our houses of worship. More than 125 clergy representing 17 different faith traditions and denominations have taken the Respect Our Faith pledge, and hundreds of laypeople are adding their support to this important message.



Rabbi Neal Katz speaks at a June press conference launching the Respect Our Faith campaign.

CHANGING THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

TFN reached a watershed decision this year: If we are to continue to be successful in defending religious freedom, we must take a larger role in seeing that responsible individuals who represent mainstream values are elected to office. So for the first time in the organization's history, TFN surveyed candidates for their positions on our issues and announced a list of endorsements to our membership, setting the stage for even more electoral involvement in the coming years.

ORGANIZING THE NEXT GENERATION OF ADVOCATES

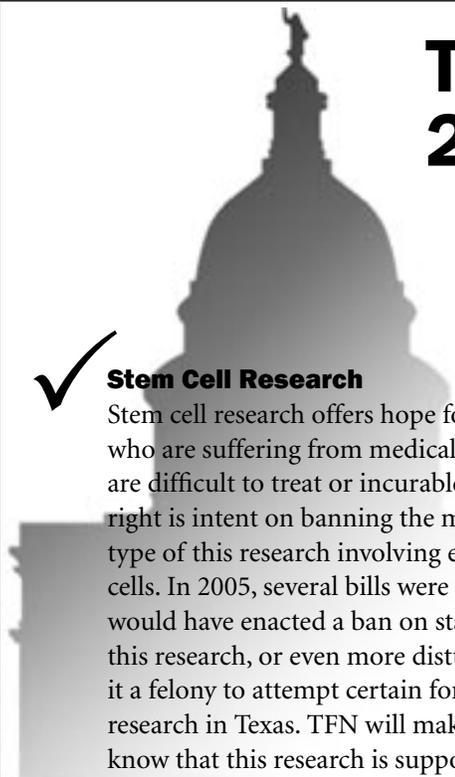
Last year saw the creation of the first-ever **TFN Student Chapter!** In its inaugural semester, the student group – based at the University of Texas at Austin – has already elected a slate of officers, established regular bi-weekly meetings and sponsored an on-campus debate on private school vouchers that attracted nearly 100 students. Read more about the Student Chapter on page 7.



TFN interns invite students to join the newly formed TFN Student Chapter at the University of Texas.

The 80th Texas Legislature: 2007 TFN Issue Primer

The biennial session of the Texas Legislature will feature the usual attacks on religious freedom and individual liberties. Here is a sneak peak at a few of the key issues the Texas Freedom Network will follow this year at the Capitol.



Stem Cell Research

Stem cell research offers hope for our loved ones who are suffering from medical conditions that are difficult to treat or incurable. Yet, the religious right is intent on banning the most promising type of this research involving embryonic stem cells. In 2005, several bills were filed in Texas that would have enacted a ban on state monies for this research, or even more disturbingly, make it a felony to attempt certain forms of stem cell research in Texas. TFN will make sure legislators know that this research is supported by people of *all* political perspectives and *all* faiths, and we will work to make Texas a leader in stem cell research.



Vouchers

Despite repeated failure at the Texas Legislature – and several high-profile defeats at the ballot box in 2006 – you can be sure voucher lobbyists and those who carry their water at the Texas Legislature will renew their cause this spring. TFN has succeeded in defeating private school voucher schemes for more than a decade thanks to our dedicated base of activists who believe vouchers would spell disaster for public education.



Lesbian & Gay Foster Care and Adoption

TFN believes that children’s best interests are served when they are provided safe, stable and loving homes, including homes headed by gay and lesbian parents. Efforts to take adopted and foster care children out of loving homes ignore the needs of our children in order to promote and codify personal bias in state law. Such mean-spirited legislation would place a huge strain on an already over-burdened foster care system and tear kids away from stable homes.



Religious Liberty

The Texas Legislature has become a laboratory for ideas that merge religion and government. This year’s session will undoubtedly bring its own unique threats to religious liberty. Bills have already been pre-filed that would create “covenant marriage” in Texas and expand the state’s troubled faith-based initiative. As always TFN will serve as a backstop for any attempts to promote one particular religion over all others in our state government and public schools.

HELP TFN PROMOTE PROMISING STEM CELL RESEARCH BY COMPLETING AND RETURNING THIS PETITION TO TFN.

YOU MAY INSTEAD COMPLETE THIS FORM AT WWW.TFN.ORG.

I believe stem cell research – using both adult and embryonic stem cells – offers hope for our loved ones who are suffering from serious illness. And I call on the governor and other elected officials to develop a responsible, ethical policy that encourages this promising research in Texas.

Name: _____

E-mail: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Phone: (w) (h) (cell) _____



Mail completed form to: TFN, P.O. Box 1624, Austin, TX 78767, or e-mail the above information to ian@tfn.org.

TFN Celebrates in San Antonio!

Even the threat of a sleet storm could not keep more than 50 dedicated San Antonio-area members from the **Texas Freedom Network's** annual reception there on November 30. Hosts Susan and Tommy Smith welcomed the enthusiastic crowd into their beautiful home. TFN President Kathy Miller gave a preview of the upcoming 80th Legislature and stressed that defending our freedoms will require unprecedented grassroots mobilization and public education campaigns. Thank you to the Smiths and all of our supporters in San Antonio!

AT RIGHT: From left, Ruth McLean Bowers, Ginger Purdy, TFN President Kathy Miller, James Aldrete and U.S. Congressman Charlie Gonzalez.

RIGHT BOTTOM: From left, Dave White, Maxine Oesterling, Angie Chaos-Peters, Linda White, Gabriel Renero and Norma Renero.

BELOW: Hosts Tommy and Susan Smith



Fort Worth Members' Reception a Huge Success!

Meralen and Gerry Tyson hosted TFN's first-ever member reception in Fort Worth on December 5. TFN staff gathered with long-time supporters, state legislators and TFN Board members to toast our accomplishments and welcome new friends to the organization. A big round of applause to the Tyson's for hosting the event and to all of our Fort Worth-area supporters!



TOP LEFT: From left, Karen Anisman, Joanne Jackson and Donald Jackson.

TOP RIGHT: From left, Rep. Lon Burnam, Beth Krugler and Kathleen Wells.

LEFT: From left, Robbie Edwards, TFN Board Vice Chair Bob Kendrick, TFN Political Director Jo-Hannah Whitsett and TFN Board member Rev. Valda Jean Combs.

CHANGES TO THE 2006 RETIREMENT LAW OFFERS GIFT OPPORTUNITY TO TFNEF

Direct, Tax-Free Contributions from Individual Retirement Accounts (IRAs) May Be Made to Texas Freedom Network Education Fund Through December 31, 2007.

The Pension Protection Act of 2006 allows taxpayers aged 70-and-a-half or older to direct tax-free distributions to be made directly from their IRA, generally only to qualified public charities like the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund – and only through December 31, 2007.

Under prior law, if you wanted to use proceeds from your IRA to benefit a charity, you would have to take a distribution from the IRA and then make a gift to the charity. The IRA distribution would have raised your taxable income, possibly causing you to shift into a higher marginal tax bracket or making otherwise untaxed Social Security benefits subject to tax.

Under the new law, you may direct your IRA trustee to distribute funds directly from the account to charities like the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund and pay no income tax on that distribution. Since you will not owe any income tax on this charitable gift, you will not be able to claim the distribution as a charitable contribution on your tax return. These distributions to charity do satisfy your minimum distribution requirements from the IRA, however, potentially saving the income taxes otherwise due on that amount.

Administrators of IRAs are currently implementing their own rules for handling these kinds of distributions. You will need to check with your specific account trustee to see if there are any limits he/she imposes.

Please contact Rachel Glast, TFN's development director, at (512) 322-0545 or rachel@tfn.org, with questions or to pledge a planned gift.

TFN Celebrates a Successful 2006!



TFN Outreach and Field Director Val Benavidez and volunteers Megan Woodburn, Matt Earhart, and Jan Soifer celebrate a successful year at TFN at the annual holiday party.

We would like to thank our incredible supporters for all your hard work promoting religious freedom and individual liberties. Our volunteers made a huge difference in 2006!

Our annual TFN holiday party was a blast. More than 100 TFN supporters attended the annual festivities at Mother Egan's Irish Pub in Austin.

A special thanks to up-and-coming musician Ed Jurdi (www.edjurdi.com) for providing the evening's entertainment.

Let's work hard to make 2007 just as successful as 2006! We're getting ready for another tough legislative session, so please sign up to join one of our Rapid Response teams at www.tfn.org.

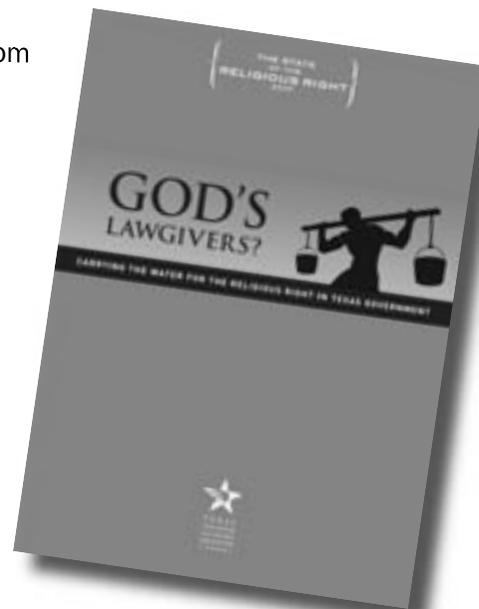
State of the Religious Right: 2007

The key lieutenants pushing the religious right's extremist agenda in the halls of state government are the focus of a new report from the **Texas Freedom Network Education Fund**. The **State of the Religious Right: 2007**, "God's Lawgivers: Carrying the Water for the Religious Right in Texas Government," is the second in an annual series of comprehensive reports on the influence of far-right religious extremists in Texas. Last year's report detailed the religious right's rise to power in the state, including the takeover of the Texas Republican Party and the money, organizations and leaders behind that effort.

This year's report features an expanded "Watch List" of those individuals who represent the religious right at the Capitol, on the State Board of Education and in other corners of government. Other key highlights from the report include:

- a history of legislation involving private school vouchers, sex education, textbook censorship and stem cell research since the early 1990s,
- a detailed listing of religious-right groups in Texas, including their agendas, financial data and leadership,
- our popular collection of some of the wackiest quotes from far-right leaders in 2006 and
- an analysis of the 2006 Texas Republican Party platform.

Check out the full report at www.tfn.org.



TFN Student Chapter Schools Young Conservatives of Texas in Voucher Debate

The Texas Freedom Network Student Chapter has hit the ground running in efforts to build grassroots support for mainstream values on the state's college campuses.

On November 30, the TFN Student Chapter went head to head with the Young Conservatives of Texas (YCT) in a rousing debate on private school vouchers at the University of Texas campus in Austin.

The TFN Student Chapter hosted the voucher debate, with the student group Longhorn Speak moderating the event. Nearly 100 students and alumni gathered to watch the debate, which quickly turned into a one-sided affair.

Stephen Rushin, the TFN Student Chapter president, and Rachel Burkhart, another member of the Student Chapter, debated two YCT representatives. The debate lasted for more than two hours, even though it was clear from the start that the TFN Student Chapter representatives were better prepared and more polished than their YCT counterparts.

The purpose of Student Chapter events, like the debate, is to inform students about important public policy issues and to increase interest in the TFN Student Chapter. Audience members at the events receive



Texas Freedom Network Student Chapter members, Rachel Burkhart and Stephen Rushin, debate the Young Conservatives of Texas on the issue of private school vouchers in late November.

literature regarding other TFN events and learn more about the student chapter, which is a key part of TFN's energized campus outreach efforts.

The student chapter has already started planning its next event – a public discussion and debate on stem cell research. The group will take advantage of the legislative session to increase interest in issues involving stem cell research, sex education in public schools and teaching evolution in science classrooms.

LEGISLATIVE ACADEMY



State Rep. Mark Strama, D-Austin, speaks to TFN Legislative Academy interns and members of TFN's Student Chapter in January at our headquarters near the University of Texas campus. The Legislative Academy gives students practical experience in grassroots activism and helps TFN promote mainstream values at the Capitol. Rep. Strama is one of many public officials who are participating in the Legislative Academy's speaker series.



Goodbye, Rebecca!

TFN says goodbye to Rebecca Leal. Rebecca traded her annual fund officer position at TFN to become the director of development at the PeopleFund, an organization that makes loans to small businesses, schools and healthcare providers and advocates for affordable homes. Rebecca was a key staff person at

TFN who worked tirelessly to organize several spectacular events, including last year's TFN Anniversary Gala. She will be missed!



Goodbye, Rachel!

As an intern, Rachel Strong Mahler has helped with the marketing and development programs at TFN, focusing primarily on the 11th Anniversary Gala and instituting TFN's first advertising campaign. She graduated in December with her master's degree in advertising from the University of Texas at Austin. She hopes to continue her work with nonprofit

organizations in Austin. Good luck, Rachel!



T E X A S
F R E E D O M
N E T W O R K

P.O. BOX 1624
AUSTIN TX 78767

NON PROFIT
US POSTAGE

PAID

PERMIT NO. 1943
AUSTIN, TX

TFN Volunteers Landscape!



TFN volunteers help Environmental Survey Consulting install plants native to Travis County in TFN's new front yard.

The Texas Freedom teamed up with Environmental Survey Consulting to renovate the TFN headquarter's front yard. ESC helped coordinate the installation of a granite patio, a new fence and a garden. The plants for the new garden are native to Travis County, which is a unique approach to landscaping that will provide TFN with a beautiful, low-maintenance front yard for years to come.

A special thanks goes to ESC and to Gabriel Valley Farms, Joss Growers Inc., McNeal Growers, Native Texas Nursery Inc. and Far South Nursery for their donations of plants for this project. Drop by and check out TFN's beautiful new home!