



TEXAS
FREEDOM
NETWORK

NETWORK NEWS

A MAINSTREAM VOICE TO COUNTER THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT · WWW.TFN.ORG · WINTER 2006

The long-running battle over the far right's efforts to undermine public education in Texas will highlight a year that includes statewide elections and increasing threats to religious freedom.

FIGHTING THE

Far Right

IN 2006

Public Schools

Since 2003, lawmakers have failed in two regular and three special legislative sessions to fix the way Texas pays for public schools. In each of those sessions, far-right legislators wasted precious time trying to push through irresponsible and unpopular measures such as private school vouchers, school privatization and expansion of a broken charter school system. Most of those efforts failed along with measures to fix the school finance system.

Following a Supreme Court ruling in November of last year, however, lawmakers must fix the school finance system by June 1. That means legislators will likely head back to Austin this spring for a special session.

The **Texas Freedom Network** will work to block the far right's attempts to hijack yet another special session. Instead of wasting time on vouchers and other distractions, lawmakers should focus on what mainstream Texans continue to demand: a fair system that fully funds our neighborhood schools.

What Can You Do?

- **Stay informed** by signing up for TFN News Clips and Action Alerts at www.tfn.org.
- **Donate** to TFN and help us counter the far right's efforts to dominate politics in our state.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Texas Faith Network in 2005, p. 3

Thanks to TFN Supporters and Volunteers, pp. 4-5

Religious Right: They Really Said It, p. 6

Nonsense at the SBOE, p. 7

Elections

The new special session will come during an election year. This means another failure on school finance could hurt Gov. Rick Perry and other anti-public education incumbents at the polls. In fact, the March Republican primaries already feature a number of challenges to anti-public education lawmakers, including House Public Education Committee Chairman Kent Grusendorf.

Voters will also render verdicts in races involving candidates who pushed the religious right's extreme agenda last year on issues such as banning gay and lesbian foster parents, crippling vital medical research on stem cells, and passing a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage and civil unions. In addition, religious-right leaders have targeted two races for the State Board of Education in their attempt to take majority control of the body. TFN will keep you informed about the candidates and their positions throughout the year.

Religious Freedom

In particular, TFN will continue to watch the far right's efforts to drag our churches into partisan politics. The Texas Restoration Project, which TFN has followed since last spring, is hosting more so-called "Pastors' Policy Briefings" this year. The events are part of a sophisticated effort to build support among pastors and congregations for favored candidates, especially Gov. Perry. A TFN complaint that the Restoration Project is improperly operating outside the state's election laws is still pending with the Texas Ethics Commission.

A note from President Kathy Miller

The Texas Freedom Network's 10th Anniversary year saw many challenges and some important victories. Yet one of the biggest victories, the defeat of a private school voucher bill in the state Legislature, has been at least partly overturned by federal action.

The 79th Legislative Session brought the first vote on vouchers in nearly a decade. Texas House Speaker Tom Craddick, Gov. Rick Perry and Dr. James Leininger – long-time sugar daddy of the voucher movement – believed that they could push through a scheme to drain millions of dollars from neighborhood public schools to fund vouchers for religious and private schools. They were wrong. In one of Speaker Craddick's most public legislative defeats, vouchers lost a critical vote on the House floor last May.

But the legislative loss wasn't enough to keep vouchers out of Texas. Sadly, in the face of the devastating losses wrought by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, right-wing think tanks and their elected partners sought to exploit these tragedies to promote many elements of their dream agenda that had not found the legislative success they craved.

At a time when our country was united in efforts to alleviate the pain and losses suffered by the victims of the hurricanes, many politicians failed to see the dangers of the policies being promoted by organizations like the Hoover Institute and the Heritage Foundation. That failure opened the door for a costly and dangerous voucher experiment.

On Dec. 30, President Bush signed into law the Hurricane Education Recovery Act, which includes Emergency Impact Aid for Displaced Students (EIADS). EIADS provides for vouchers to reimburse private and religious schools that educate displaced students. This was just one among many post-hurricane policies that will funnel tax-dollars to private businesses and religious institutions.

TFN joins everyone in our state and nation in hoping the victims of Katrina and Rita find the assistance they need and the hope they deserve to rebuild their lives. And we are encouraged that EIADS includes provisions against discrimination at private and religious schools that accept federal vouchers, as well as an expiration date – this August.

But the far right has long sought a "pilot" voucher program in Texas. Now it has one. That fact, combined with Speaker Craddick's charge to the interim House Public Education Committee to study "successful voucher programs" and Dr. Leininger's expected investment in the upcoming primary elections to unseat moderate pro-public education legislators, indicates that a spring special session on our school finance crisis is likely to bring another attempt to pass vouchers in Texas.

We will need all the energy and efforts of our tremendous grassroots network to stop these efforts. As always, TFN will be diligent in monitoring the words and deeds of our elected officials, and we will notify all of you if this issue heats up.

A decade of success in defending neighborhood public schools should not fall prey to the opportunistic efforts of the far right in the face of a national tragedy. We'll do all we can, with your help, to make sure that doesn't happen.



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Janis Pinnelli's birthday by Lisa Jarrell
Dr. and Mrs. Norman Kaplan's 30th wedding anniversary by Norman's four daughters – Marcia Kaplan, Cynthia Reynolds, Carolyn Kaplan and Diane Orley – and their families



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Network News is the official newsletter of the Texas Freedom Network and the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund.

TFN Has Moved!

The Texas Freedom Network continues to grow with support from people like you! Our new home is near the University of Texas campus in Austin. We have brought with us our big plans for the future plus the Jerry Falwell dartboard, the "Don't Mess with Textbooks" posters, 10 years of "Lobby Day" anti-voucher packets, and hundreds of photos of past employees, volunteers, friends and allies. You can still contact us at the same P.O. Box, phone number and e-mail addresses. Please join us for a housewarming and volunteer appreciation party on Feb. 16!





Faith In Texas

The past year saw a renewed interest in religion in the public square. More than ever before, the complex – and sometimes problematic – interplay of faith and politics was at the heart of public policy debates across the state and country. While the growing influence of groups with a narrow, exclusionary religious agenda continued to grab headlines, members of the **Texas Faith Network** played an important role in demonstrating the positive role faith can play in the public squares of Texas.

Texas Legislature

High-profile debates on issues such as marriage rights, Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) funding and school vouchers placed religion front and center during Texas’ 79th legislative session last spring. Sixty-two Faith Network clergy participated in the session through TFN’s rapid-response Action Teams. In addition to the important, behind-the-scenes work of calling and writing legislators, religious leaders often played a more public role in giving voice to mainstream values. At press conferences, Rev. Lou Snead of Austin’s Faith Presbyterian Church and Rev. Valda Jean Combs of McMillan United Methodist Church in Fort Worth called for full restoration of CHIP benefits for Texas kids. The Faith Network also circulated a clergy statement opposing vouchers. More than 175 clergy members from around the state have now signed on to this statement in support of public schools.

The Bible and Public Schools

The release of a TFN Education Fund report in August set off a national debate around the thorny issues involved with teaching a course on the Bible in public schools. The report highlighted serious problems with a Bible curriculum being aggressively marketed by the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools. Although defenders of the course materials tried to paint TFN as “anti-religion extremists” out to “ban the Bible,” the public support for TFN from a variety of sources in the religious community gave lie to these charges.

At an August press conference in Austin, Rev. Ragan Courtney, Rabbi Alan Freedman and Dr. Richard Bautch – representing Baptist, Jewish and Catholic traditions respectively – called on public schools to reject the curriculum because of its sectarian bias and poor scholarship. In addition, almost 200 religious scholars – from all over the world – signed on to a letter supporting the report’s conclusion that the National Council’s curriculum is not appropriate for use in public schools.

Moral Values Conference

More than 300 people attended the Faith Network’s September conference, “The Moral of the Story: Reviving Progressive Values in American Politics.” Attendees included more than 50 clergy from around the state, and the event brought together 30 local and national religious organizations as partners. The event was another important step in TFN’s work to counter the religious right’s attempts to monopolize the discussion of moral values in the public square.



Top: Congregants of McMillan UMC in Fort Worth demand restoration of the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP).

Middle: Rabbi Alan Freedman (speaking), Dr. Richard Bautch (left) and Rev. Ragan Courtney (right) speak at a TFN press conference exposing a flawed Bible curriculum.

Bottom: Old friends Rev. Lander Bethel and Rev. Lou Snead reconnect at the Faith Network’s “Moral Values” conference.

Thanks to All TFN Supporters in 2005!

During **Texas Freedom Network's** 10th year, major donors from across the country stepped up to make 2005 a banner fundraising year. We offer heartfelt thanks to our \$1,000+ donors for making 2005 a tremendous financial success.

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The Tenth Anniversary Silent Auction & Gala was the highlight of the year due to our event committee & donors to the silent auction. Special thanks to all of those who were involved in making this year's event a great success.

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TFN Volunteers Were Hard at Work in 2005!

This year volunteers stuffed more than 15,000 pieces of mail, made hundreds of calls to legislators and supporters, volunteered at the Texas Faith Network conference and at special events, testified at the Legislature and wrote letters to the editor. Simply put, they were crucial to TFN's efforts and important victories this year. Many thanks to all of the volunteers who helped TFN make a difference this year.

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Top: Volunteers Ethyl Rosenblatt and Janice Boyd

Bottom: Volunteer Mark Hester

Religious-Right Watch

They Really Said It...

It's getting even harder for religious-right poo-bahs to pretend their agenda doesn't lie far outside the mainstream. Just read a sampling of what some of them had to say in 2005.

"I heard a minister the other day talking about the great injustice and evil of the men in white robes, the Ku Klux Klan, that roamed the country in the South, and they did great wrong to civil rights and to morality. And now we have black-robed men, and that's what you're talking about."

- **James Dobson**, head of Focus on the Family and a leader of the religious right's "War on the Judiciary," comparing the U.S. Supreme Court to the Ku Klux Klan. April 13, *EthicsDaily.com*.

"I'd like to say to the good citizens of Dover: if there is a disaster in your area, don't turn to God – you just rejected Him from your city."

- **The Rev. Pat Robertson**, arguing that the people of Dover, Penn., had invited God's wrath by voting out of office local school board members who wanted to weaken the discussion of evolution by including information about "intelligent design" in biology textbooks. November 11, *Washington Post*.

"God is not mocked. We reap what we sow . . . The city of New Orleans has sown innocent bloodshed and violence in the womb for years and years and has now reaped bloodshed and violence on her streets."

- From **Columbia Christians for Life**, which joined other religious-right groups and leaders in claiming that Hurricane Katrina is God's punishment for New Orleans's tolerance of abortion and homosexuals/gay rights. September 6, *Salon.com*.

"One thing that God has brought to us is Terri Schiavo, to help elevate the visibility of what is going on in America."

- Then-House Majority Leader **Tom DeLay**, leading the charge of religious-right politicians seeking to capitalize on the tragic debate over whether to remove feeding tubes from a brain-damaged Florida woman who had been in a vegetative state for more than a decade. March 22, *New York Times*.

* **Gov. Rick Perry**, when asked what he would tell gay and lesbian war veterans returning from Iraq to a state that now bans legal recognition of their relationships. June 6, *KXAS-TV*.

"I don't believe in evolution – I believe in creation. . . .

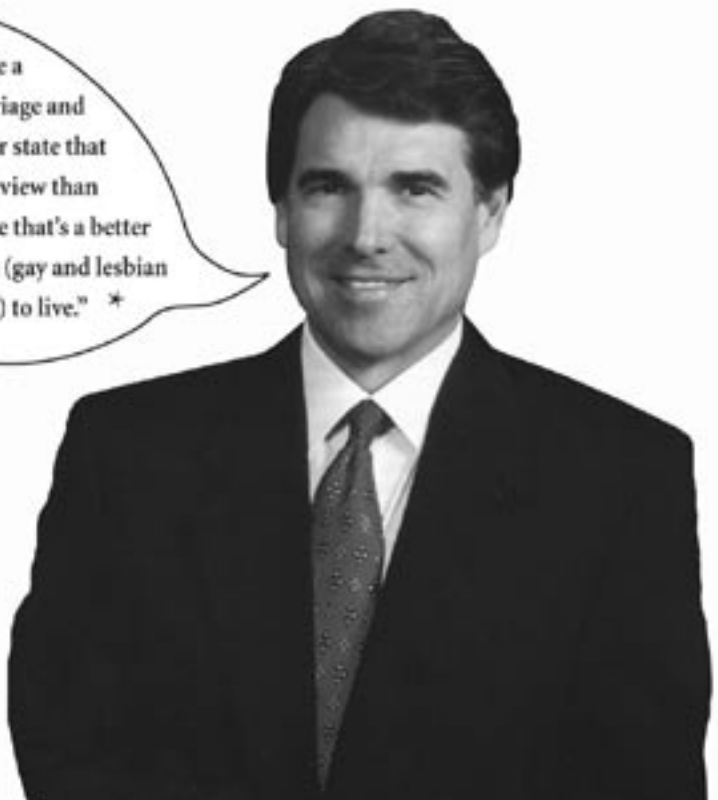
Evolution is a theory. It is a theory, it's not a fact. There is no fact for evolution, none. . . . Why are we teaching a theory, when we have [another] position – creation – that the majority of the people in this country believe?"

- **State Rep. Charlie Howard**, R-Sugar Land, who wanted to allow the State Board of Education to require that biology textbooks include discussions of creationism. April 25, *Dallas Morning News*.

"We are to exercise godly dominion and influence over our neighborhoods, our schools, our government . . . our entertainment media, our news media, our scientific endeavors – in short, over every aspect and institution of human society!"

- Prominent evangelical minister **D. James Kennedy**, espousing the grand vision of the religious right – turning America into a theocratic state. March 16, *Christian Science Monitor*

"Texans have made a decision about marriage and if there is some other state that has a more lenient view than Texas then maybe that's a better place for them (gay and lesbian families) to live." *



SBOE Watch: *Manufacturing Problems*



What Can You Do?

Tell your SBOE member that you support including academic experts as well as teachers on textbook review panels. You can find the name and contact information for your SBOE member at www.capitol.state.tx.us/fyi/fyi.

WANTED: MATH TEACHERS AND PROFESSORS

This year the State Board of Education will review proposed math textbooks for Grades 6-12. TFN will monitor the adoption process from start to finish. In the meantime, the Texas Education Agency is accepting nominations for its math textbook review panels. If you would like to participate, please contact Heather Alden at 512-322-0545 or heather@tfn.org.

VOTE IN 2006!

Frustrated by “leaders” who continue to fail our public schools? Tired of seeing the religious right push its extreme agenda at the SBOE and the Capitol? Vote!

KEY DATES FOR THE MARCH 7 PARTY PRIMARIES:

Feb. 6 – Last day to register to vote
Feb. 21 – Early voting begins
Mar. 3 – Last day to vote early
Mar. 7 – Primary Election Day

Some things never change. At a November meeting of the State Board of Education, far-right board members once again used what should have been benign or routine business to push their extreme agenda.

The first such issue was over a renewal of the state board’s membership in the National Association of State School Boards of Education (NASBE). Far-right Board member Terri Leo – surprise! – objected to that routine action, resurrecting past board battles over sex and the First Amendment.

The Republican from Spring criticized the NASBE’s support for medically and scientifically accurate, comprehensive sex education in public schools. Then she went after gay and lesbian students, attacking an NASBE policy on bullying that includes a section on homosexuality. Leo says the policy pushes “a lifestyle that many feel is a dangerous lifestyle.” In fact, her pal Rick Scarborough, a prominent religious-right minister and leader, says the NASBE serves as a vehicle for advancing the “gay agenda” in the guise of promoting tolerance.

Then for good measure, Leo accused the NASBE of distorting the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. She targeted a 2004 NASBE publication on citizenship that notes the separation of church and state as a key constitutional protection. To Leo, such language promotes the idea that the First Amendment prohibits public expression of religious beliefs. Leo ignored, of course, the distinction between public expression and government-sponsored expression.

Rather than rejecting Leo’s nonsensical arguments, State Board members voted 10-5 to cancel membership in the NASBE. As a result, the State Board will have no voice in determining future NASBE policies. That’ll show ‘em.

Who Needs Experts?

The nonsense didn’t stop with sex and the First Amendment. Board members also discussed proposed changes to the rules that govern statewide textbook adoptions – long a contentious issue.

The Texas Sunset Commission in 2005 recommended changes in the textbook approval process after its state-mandated review of the Texas Education Agency. One proposal, endorsed by TFN, called for content experts to sit on the state textbook review panels. Those academic experts would help ensure that decisions about textbook adoptions are based on factual information, not the political or religious beliefs of State Board members and unqualified review panelists.

Yet Board Chairman Geraldine “Tincy” Miller didn’t see it that way. Said the far-right leader of the Board:

“But let me tell ya, who are our experts? The teacher. The teacher who is in the classroom every day with those kids, trying to implement, ya know, the curriculum. With all due respect to the professors, how many of us remember the professors who were la-la-ing up there, and, ya know, have never been in the classroom, ok, with the kid. And, uh, I’m not sure I want that professor on the textbook panel.”

Maybe we shouldn’t try to guess whether Miller also objects to having professors actually write the textbooks. Board members postponed their decision on new textbook rules until February.



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San Antonio Supporters Celebrate

Supporters in the Alamo City turned out at the beautiful home of Lukin Gilliland in December to celebrate key TFN victories in 2005 and look ahead to a promising 2006. Many thanks to our wonderful friends and supporters in San Antonio!

At right: Beverly Halter and Martha Landsman

Bottom left: Host Lukin Gilliland

Bottom middle: Deborah White and Linda White

Bottom right: Julie Little, Susan Smith, Jean Flynn

