



Former DISD superintendent Linus Wright has bold plan for restructuring public education

By Steve Blow

January 18th, 2012

At age 84, Linus Wright is long retired from public education. But the former Dallas schools superintendent has bold ideas to reform it.

Actually, he considers “reform” too mild a word for the job at hand. “Restructure” is more like it.

“You can’t get anywhere being timid,” he said Wednesday with a swashbuckling smile.

Maybe only someone with the wisdom and freedom of advanced age could propose an idea as bold as killing the 12th grade of high school. “A big waste of time,” he calls the senior year.

In its place, Wright would like to see that money spent at the other end of the process — on early childhood education, particularly for low-income and limited-English children.

“You can accomplish so much more there,” he said.

A middle-class child starts first grade with a spoken vocabulary of 2,000 to 4,000 words, but a child born into poverty may have only 400 words. And he said that’s a deficit that schools almost never overcome.

Wright believes the only solution is to start sooner with those children, at age 3. And it could be done economically because you wouldn’t have to use degreed teachers.

Research shows that child care providers with proper training are fully capable of offering the academic foundation that children need, he said.

Wright, who ably served as DISD superintendent from 1978 to 1987, said he began to think about this restructuring last year as the Texas Legislature slashed the education budget.

“You can’t just keep cutting teachers,” he said. “Something has to be done to improve education with the money we have.”

Among other ideas, he would expand the school calendar. What we have now is a relic of our distant agrarian past. Students no longer need summers and afternoons free to help with farm chores. What they need to compete in the modern world is a lot more instruction time.

“In other industrialized countries, students go to school 240 days a year versus our 180 days,” Wright said. “And they go eight hours a day versus our six. You can see why their students achieve more.”

As for those former 12th-graders, Wright said they will continue their educations at universities or community colleges. In fact, he would turn all vocational education over to community colleges, which can do a better job at far less cost than high schools, he believes.

Already, many high school seniors take college-level AP classes and dual-credit courses at community colleges. So the idea of fully shifting those students to a college setting is not so radical.

Except for football, of course.

Wright knows his idea will face tremendous opposition from coaches and athletic boosters who want to see those big seniors play. But Wright said athletics are overemphasized at all levels of schooling today. Scholastics would simply have to trump athletics in this case.

Wright notes that high school ended at the 11th grade when he graduated. The 12th grade was added in 1940, not out of academic necessity but because the Great Depression had left so many young people without jobs or money for college, he said.

Wright’s 13 recommendations will get their first public discussion next month at an event sponsored by the National Center for Policy Analysis, a Dallas-based think tank.

The lifelong educator said politicians are too timid to take his ideas and run with them. Change will only come if civic leaders embrace the ideas and rally public support, he said.

All Americans ought to be alarmed at how our students lag their peers around the world, particularly in math and science, he said. And our dropout rate of 30 to 40 percent is simply unsustainable.

“I’m thinking about our country and our future,” Wright said. “We really don’t have a choice. We have to make changes.”