School leaders talk about public education, democracy

Former Texas Commissioner of Education Dr. Mike Moses had a message for the educators, administrators and leaders during the 2018 Educational Leadership Conference at the University of North Texas.

“What you do matters,” Mosses said.

Moses presented the opening remarks at the annual event hosted by the UNT College of Education’s Department of Teacher Education and Administration. The event was scheduled for the day after the Nov. 6 midterm general election to focus on the intersection of politics and education.

Moses was the Commissioner of Education for the state of Texas from 1995 through 1999, deputy chancellor for Systems Operations at the Texas Tech University System from 1999 to 2001 and general superintendent of the Dallas Independent School District from 2001 until 2004. The Mike Moses Chair in Educational Leadership in the College of Education is named after him. College of Education professor Dr. Elizabeth Murakami, endowed Mike Moses Chair in Educational Leadership, headed the conference which gathered more than 100 people to discuss the need to support public education in Texas.

Moses noted that following the midterm election results, the conference was a good time to consider the importance of education in the state and nation.

“Previous generations, going back to the Founding Fathers, had thought that education is what makes us great,” Moses said.

When polled about which they would rather the U.S. have — the greatest military in the world, the greatest economy in the world or the greatest educational system in the world — previous generations consistently said the greatest educational system in the world because, with the best education, the nation would also have the best military and the best economy. But Moses noted that today’s educators face challenges in a society where 70 percent of the population does not have school-age children and vote making important decisions about the future of education.

“The biggest question we face in Texas and the nation is will the older generation pay to educate the younger generation — will an older, aging Anglo population pay to education a younger minority population,” Moses said.

Moses noted that the average age for Hispanics in Texas is 27 while the average age for Anglos is 41. He also said that the fastest growing populations in the state were those 55 and older and those 18 and younger.

Dr. Kevin Brown, the executive director of the Texas Association of School Administrators and former superintendent of the Alamos Heights Independent School District, also spoke on public education and “the promise of democracy.”

“I owe everything in my life to public education,” Brown said. “People have forgotten why we have public education. The why matters.”

Brown said that democracy was built on the idea of public education for every child, even when when it didn’t always happen that way. He also cited Founding Fathers Thomas Jefferson and John Adams and their commitments to public education.

“If you look at the history of America … in every one of these communities, one of the first things they did was build a school, and they were so invested in public education that they were willing to house teachers in their homes,” Brown said.

Dr. Phil Gore, division director for leadership services at the Texas Association of School Boards also highlighted the importance of “connecting each individual with the largest purpose of preparing children for the future of the country.”

Dr. Jamie Wilson, superintendent of the Denton Independent School District; Gayle Stinson, superintendent of the Lake Dallas Independent School District; and David Belding, superintendent of the Aubrey Independent
School District [8], talked about challenges small- and mid-size districts face when not supported by their communities. In an effort to strengthening support for districts, the superintendents have created the North Texas Education Leadership Collaborative.

Moses said when he was education commissioner he would often disagree with then Gov. George W. Bush, the 43rd president of the United States, about the role of educators.

“Teachers and educators weren’t immigration enforcement. We educated the people who are here,” Moses. “If you want to be firm about immigration; if you want to be firm about entitlements, you have to be firm about education. You have to be firm about how people succeed in this country.”

Moses said a question he sometimes asks of groups is do they like the free market? Do they like democracy? Do they like equal opportunity for everyone? Do they like citizen rule?

“Well, if you like those things, who is going to continue those values 50 years from now?” Moses said.

He went on to note that today, 67 percent of school-aged children in Texas are from minority populations and 43 percent are Hispanic.

“That’s who is going to ensure we have those things you like in 50 years,” Moses said. “This (democratic) experiment does not endure if we do not teach the children the values we believe in.”

Moses said the older generation has an obligation to educate the younger generation and called the taxes people pay an investment in the future. But he also said educators have to do more to inform people and to help others see it as an investment.

“If we’re going to bridge the gap between education and politics, we have to keep our eye on the ball. What we do matters. What you do matters,” Moses said.

Elizabeth Murakami [9]

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