

By Mike Norman

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Education Commissioner Robert Scott must feel a bit misunderstood. He's getting both praise and heavy criticism for railing about what's gone wrong with standardized testing in Texas public schools.

It's not that he wasn't clear. It's just that some of his words were more memorable than others.

In a span of just five days, Scott spoke out twice, very publicly, about the "perversion" that testing has become. He said many people now see state testing as a symbol of what's wrong with public schools, "the heart of the vampire." Summoning his inner Ike Eisenhower, he said businesses that have sprung up to design, prepare and score tests and provide other services related to them are "not just a cottage industry but a military-industrial complex."

It's clear that he's seriously unhappy with what standardized testing has become. He got a standing ovation for his thoughts at a meeting of the Texas Association of School Administrators on Tuesday. A few days earlier, he had voiced them at the start of a State Board of Education meeting and received praise from several board members.

But when word of his comments got around, some political heavyweights were not happy. State Sen. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, the chairwoman of the Senate Education Committee, told the Texas Tribune she was "blown away" because Scott in the past has been a proponent of standardized testing and the public school accountability system.

Shapiro told the Tribune that Scott "owes all of the legislators an explanation of his comments."

Bill Hammond, the politically connected president of the Texas Association of Business, said Scott's comments sounded like they came from "a cheerleader for mediocrity."

If that turns out to be the way Scott's views are taken, it will be a shame. He'll have been hanged by his own buzzwords, while the importance of their context will have been missed.

Anyone who's interested in getting the full picture can watch a video of Scott's 45-minute conversation with the State Board of Education at [bit.ly/xD7Rr6](http://bit.ly/xD7Rr6). Click on the link that says "View Discussion of item 1."

If you're really interested in what's going on in Texas schools, interested in the views of a man who has been integral in shaping all of that yet is now very frustrated with the results, even if you're interested in his views as a single parent with children in those schools, it's worth the effort to hear him out.

Here are some of the highlights:

When the public school accountability system was designed in 1995, Scott says, "the mantra was 'freedom with accountability.' We were going to free up school districts to do whatever they wanted,

but there would be accountability." Over time, he said, "We kept the accountability, but we got rid of the freedom."

Board member George Clayton of Richardson complained that too many benchmark tests are given to students in preparation for the state tests, to the point that "many schools have become nothing but testing centers."

Scott responded, "What we've done over the past decade is we've doubled down on the test every couple of years and used it for more and more things to make it the be-all, end-all" of K-12 education. "You've reached a point now where you've got this one thing that the entire system is dependent upon. It is the heart of the vampire, so to speak."

Some people want to drive a stake through that heart, he said, but that would kill off the worthwhile parts of the system. "I don't think that's healthy. I think that there needs to be a balance here."

Scott wants a system in which test results are just "one piece of the bottom line, and everything else that happens in a school year is factored into that equation."

Under a bill passed by the Legislature last year, the Texas Education Agency is working with 20 school districts "visioning" a better testing and accountability system. "Individuals care about kids," he said. "The system doesn't give a damn about kids unless you make it care."

He said he hopes to work with the Legislature next year to examine the current system for what parts contribute to better education and what parts don't.

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Read more here: <http://www.star-telegram.com/2012/02/02/3708173/testing-has-become-a-perversion.html#storylink=cpy#storylink=cpy>