

## **Public Education: The Bedrock of Democracy**

*It is not solely a collection of buildings and classrooms; public education is a beacon of hope, equality and progress.*

I consider myself fortunate to be a part of the Tulsa community, where compassion and open-mindedness thrive, and where a powerful force that shapes future generations and secures the very essence of our democracy exists: public education.

As a product of public education and in my time working with community leaders, families, students and educators, I have witnessed the transformative impact of public education, both on an individual and societal level. Public education is not merely a system; it is the backbone of democracy, fostering equality, nurturing informed citizens, and paving the way for future generations to lead.

I am fortunate to have had teachers who saw potential in me and who encouraged me to step out of my comfort zone and helped me take on leadership roles in student organizations. As a student, I participate in field trips to visit the state capital, go on leadership retreats hosted by great community organizations, attend community meetings with leaders who actively worked to address the challenges our community faced. The investment of so many of these individuals had a direct impact on the person I am today.

At the core of our democratic values lies the belief that every child, regardless of their background, deserves an equal opportunity to succeed. Public education is the embodiment of this principle. In our classrooms, children from diverse socioeconomic, racial and cultural backgrounds come together to learn side by side. Students acquire an understanding of our state's and nation's history and structures, yes, but schools also give them an opportunity to develop crucial life skills, such as empathy, teamwork and critical thinking, which are essential for a thriving democracy. By allowing students a courageous space to engage with students of different beliefs and values, they learn to respect and appreciate differences, and participate in meaningful dialogue.

Public education empowers individuals to participate actively in civic life. When we provide a comprehensive and inclusive education to our students, we equip them with the tools they need to understand complex societal issues, critically analyze information and make informed decisions. Now more than ever, as we continue to see a proliferation of misinformation and strife on nearly every public forum, public schools play a pivotal role in shaping discerning citizens who can coexist and work together despite – and often because of – their differences.

Beyond its impact on the individual level, public education fosters social cohesion and solidarity. When we invest in the education of our children, we invest in the future of our community. Strong public schools create a sense of pride and shared identity among neighbors, bridging gaps that divide us. Our schools serve as hubs where families connect and bond over common interests and goals: providing the best possible education for their kids and setting them up for

success. Through school events, parent-teacher associations and community engagement initiatives, public education fosters a sense of belonging and unity.

As we face challenges that threaten the integrity of our school systems, our role as citizens is to understand and advocate for the importance of equal, objective public education in nurturing innovative thinkers and problem-solvers.

Today's global economy demands a workforce equipped with advanced skills and deep understanding of technology and global affairs, and it requires something deeper too: empathy, critical thinking and an ability to engage in transparent, open-minded conversations.

As proud Tulsans, we must continue to stand up for our public education for the role it plays in shaping the next generation of democratic and just leaders. It is not solely a collection of buildings and classrooms; public education is a beacon of hope, equality and progress. By investing in our public schools, we are investing in the very foundation of our democracy.

Let us continue to work together in support of public education, ensuring that every child in Tulsa has access to quality learning opportunities. By doing so, we are not only securing a brighter future for our youth but also safeguarding the democratic values that define who we are as a community and as a nation.