



TEXAS *Legends*

James Leininger

Dr. James Leininger is a man on a mission to transform education in Texas and is an example of how organized interests can seek to influence state policy. Leininger began his journey to become the state's leading advocate of school vouchers over twenty years ago when he discovered that some of the employees of his very successful hospital bed company were functionally illiterate despite having high school diplomas. Initially, he tried to help by personally sponsoring a mentoring program. When his mentoring program failed to produce change, Leininger became interested in vouchers, which are certificates given to parents that can be used to pay for education for their children at the school of their choice as a means of allowing students to find their way into better schools. He began by offering scholarships to help poor students pay the \$3,000 needed to attend public schools in other districts or private schools. Over the years, students in his

privately funded scholarship program have enjoyed a 100 percent graduation rate and 95 percent have gone on to college.

In 1993, Leininger began working with the Texas Legislature to create a state-funded voucher system. In the years since, he has backed voucher-friendly candidates and worked directly with the legislature. In the 2006 election, he pumped over \$5 million into campaigns, backing Republican candidates who favored vouchers. In five races, Leininger backed Republican challengers to the Republican incumbents in that party's primary, in one race accounting for 96 percent of a candidate's campaign funds. While the flood of money was alarming to some, Leininger's massive spending generally failed to be effective. Despite spending about \$2.5 million in five Republican primary races, three of the five candidates that Leininger backed failed to unseat the incumbent.

In 2007, Leininger announced that he would be ending his privately financed voucher program for 2,000 students and urged the legislature to approve a state-funded system. While he has ended his own program, Leininger plans on continuing to support pro-voucher candidates and a statewide voucher program in Texas.

While Leininger has not won approval for vouchers, he has been attacked for his efforts to change public schools in Texas. Leininger attributes the bad press coverage he has received to misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the voucher issue. However, some of the concerns emerge from the natural worries that people have about one person playing such a large role in an election. Either way, James Leininger has demonstrated the potential for one person to take political action on his or her own.