

PROTECTING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
- DEFENDING CIVIL LIBERTIES -
STRENGTHENING PUBLIC SCHOOLS



Dear friends,

Hanging on a wall of the conference room at Texas Freedom Network headquarters is a frame with a notecard inside. “It’s worse than I imagined,” the note reads. I would recognize the handwriting even today, it is Cecile’s.

When TFN founder Cecile Richards wrote those words, in 1995, she was at a Texas State Board of Education (SBOE) hearing on health textbooks. Right-wing board members and activists had hijacked the meeting, turning it into an opportunity to attack sex education, demonize LGBT people and push a host of other issues that energize religious-right activists.

Cecile handed that note to her friend Harriett Peppel, who became TFN’s first board chair, and the idea for TFN was solidified. That’s why we refer to that note as TFN’s founding document.

That note may have begun TFN’s history, but there have been many memorable moments since then – so many that it would be impossible to list them all in these pages. Instead, let me give you a glimpse of TFN’s history by narrowing it down to some of my favorites.

Did you know that state legislators have tried to pass at least one private school voucher scheme in every legislative session since TFN’s founding in 1995? We’ve fought hard against those bills. I felt honored in 2005 to be joined once again at the Capitol by parents from San Antonio’s Edgewood Independent School District, one of the most economically disadvantaged in the state, to fight back against a scheme that would strip funding from their schools. Far-right activists claimed that a privately funded voucher program had improved the district’s schools. But we knew otherwise, and had the data to back it up. And parents like Mike Espinoza knew that a private school that accepted vouchers could not meet the needs of his autistic son. Because parents like Mike stood up, voucher bills were defeated that year, as they have all other years. Texas to this day remains a #NoVouchers state.

In 2009, TFN took on a topic stubbornly neglected by lawmakers: sex education. Just Say Don’t Know was a groundbreaking study for its scope and its topic. For the first time, parents had a full picture of the dismal state of sex education in Texas and how abstinence-only instruction fails our children. Since that eye-opening report,

we’ve seen a significant increase in the percentage of school districts that, while still emphasizing abstinence, now include information about birth control in their sex ed courses.

This year the freedom to marry came to Texas. Who would have thought we’d see that day in this state? We hoped it was coming, and far-right lawmakers prepared for the Supreme Court ruling by trying to nullify it with more than 20 anti-LGBT bills, a record for any state. After spending so much time and energy knocking down every one of those bills, seeing so many loving, committed LGBT couples finally tie the knot in Texas was a particularly sweet moment for me, my staff and the great partner organizations we work with.

And it’s not a moment per se, but I have to mention the incredible faith leaders who stood with us on the issues I mentioned. They have been indispensable in other victories, like winning passage of a hate crimes law that covers crimes committed because of bias against LGBT people and helping defend – successfully – the teaching of evolution in public schools.

Finally, the time I spend with the amazing young activists from universities and community colleges across the state who are part of Texas Rising, TFN’s youth organizing and leadership development program, is memorable for me. These future leaders are as passionate and committed to standing up for true Texas values as were the very first TFN supporters. When I work beside the Texas Rising superstars, I know that progress will continue in our state.

Those are just a few of the best moments I want to share with you as we turn the page on TFN’s first two decades. Not everything has been a victory, though. We’ve had tough days and suffered some losses. But I have to ask, if Cecile were to go to the next SBOE meeting, would she write the same thing she did in 1995?

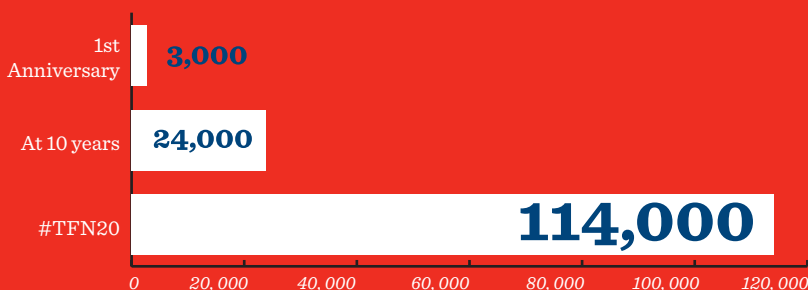
Maybe her new note would say this: We’re not there yet, but it’s much better than it was.

Thank you for 20 great years. Now let’s get to work on the next 20.



Kathy Miller
TFN President

The Growing Network



The Number of TFN Members

Social media reach increased by...



237%



570%

in the past four years.

Preparing for the next #TFN20 years



TFN launched a youth program in 2006 with a lone student chapter at the University of Texas at Austin. Now under the name **Texas Rising**, the program is designed to inspire and engage a rising generation of young Texans in electoral politics, public policy advocacy and community organizing.

Today, **Texas Rising** has student chapters on 12 college campuses, and more are in the works.



Altogether, we have trained more than 1,500 young activists to transform Texas into a better, fairer state. These students have focused especially on ensuring that all Texans – including LGBT Texans – are treated equally under the law, that women have full access to reproductive health care and that teens get responsible, comprehensive sex education.

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Texas Freedom Network Student Chapters



- Collin County College
- UT-Dallas
- University of Houston
- UTEP
- University of Houston-Downtown
- UT-Rio Grande Valley
- University of North Texas
- UT-San Antonio
- UT-Arlington
- Texas State University
- UT-Austin
- Trinity University

By the Numbers

12

TEXAS RISING ON-CAMPUS CHAPTERS



1,500+

ACTIVISTS TRAINED



9,275

NEW VOTERS REGISTERED*



14,300

PLEDGES TO VOTE COLLECTED*



27,000

CALLS MADE TO GET YOUNG VOTERS TO THE POLLS



96,175

CONTACTS TO VOTERS*



Uncountable

SLICES OF PIZZA CONSUMED DURING TEXAS RISING EVENTS



**since 2012*



two decades of *progress* in Texas

While much has changed in Texas over the last #TFN20 years, TFN’s mission remains the same: protect religious freedom, stand up for civil liberties and defend our neighborhood public schools.

That means fighting against misguided voucher schemes that undermine public education and erode the wall between church and state at the expense of our public schools.

It means standing up to far-right State Board of Education members and activists who want to politicize our kids’ classrooms by censoring and injecting their personal views into public school textbooks.

And it also means, of course, defending the fundamental right of all Texans to practice the faith of their choice or to practice no faith at all.

Even when working against the odds in the difficult political environment that is Texas, TFN has been part of some notable accomplishments in its 20-year history.



Religious Freedom

★ TFN commissioned groundbreaking research exposing the use of public school courses about the Bible to promote the sectarian views of conservative religious fundamentalists.

★ TFN's research was instrumental in convincing lawmakers to begin rolling back much of the "faith-based initiative," a set of failed policies first championed by Gov. George W. Bush that shifted taxpayer dollars to religious social service providers.

★ In 1999, TFN helped pass a responsible, state-level Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) that both protects religious liberty and bars the use of religion to discriminate.

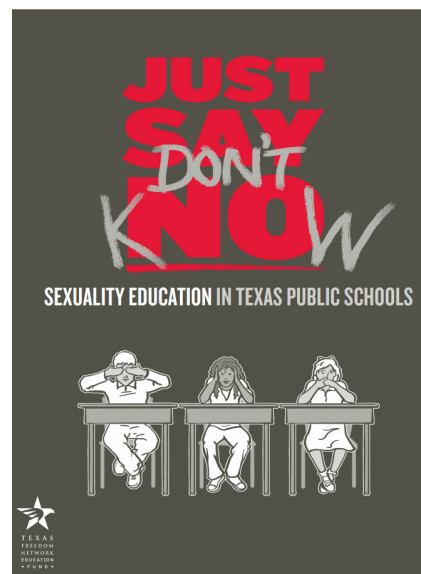


Public Education

★ Lawmakers have filed at least one private school voucher bill in every legislative session since TFN was founded in 1995. TFN has helped defeat every single one of those bills, ensuring that Texas remains a #NoVouchers state.

★ TFN has been successful in beating back textbook censorship efforts, including leading efforts to ensure that right-wing extremists and State Board of Education members don't undermine the teaching of evolution and climate science.

★ In 2009, TFN made national headlines for "Just Say Don't Know," a detailed, first-of-its-kind study of the disastrous state of sex education in Texas public schools. That report helped begin a shift away from abstinence-only toward comprehensive sex education in many school districts across the state. TFN mobilized and trained activists around the state to lobby for changes to local sex ed policies. Partly as a result, the percentage of school districts with sex ed materials that teach about birth control increased from less than 4 percent overall in 2007-08 to more than 25 percent in a 2010-11 survey.



Civil Liberties

★ Helped this year defeat more than 20 anti-LGBT bills designed to, in one form or another, nullify the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in favor of same-sex marriage and promote discrimination against LGBT Texans.

★ Helped defeat efforts in various legislative sessions to deny children a loving home simply because the adoptive or foster parents are gay or lesbian.

★ TFN proudly worked in 2001 for the successful passage of a strong state law that increased penalties for hate crimes, including crimes committed because of bias against LGBT people.

★ TFN has successfully fought efforts to gut Texas' Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) and turn it into a license to discriminate in the name of religion.



TFN could not accomplish our work without your support. We are grateful to the members of the Freedom Council – donors who give \$1,000 or more annually – for their generosity in 2015. Thank you!

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Sarah Woelk & Phil Durst
Edith & Robert Zinn



1 Elaine Gross and TFN Board Chair Joni Cohan at the special event in Dallas



2 Laura Elcock, Kristy Bednar, Walter Elcock, Marguerite Hoffman and Janie McGarr celebrate TFN's 20th anniversary in Dallas.



3 Melanie Gray and Steve Susman celebrate our 20th anniversary in Houston.

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TFN president Kathy Miller, James & Elma Aldrete, Cecile Richards and Phil Durst at TFN's EPIC Evening

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By Diana & Eric Orta

Matthew Wren Cook
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